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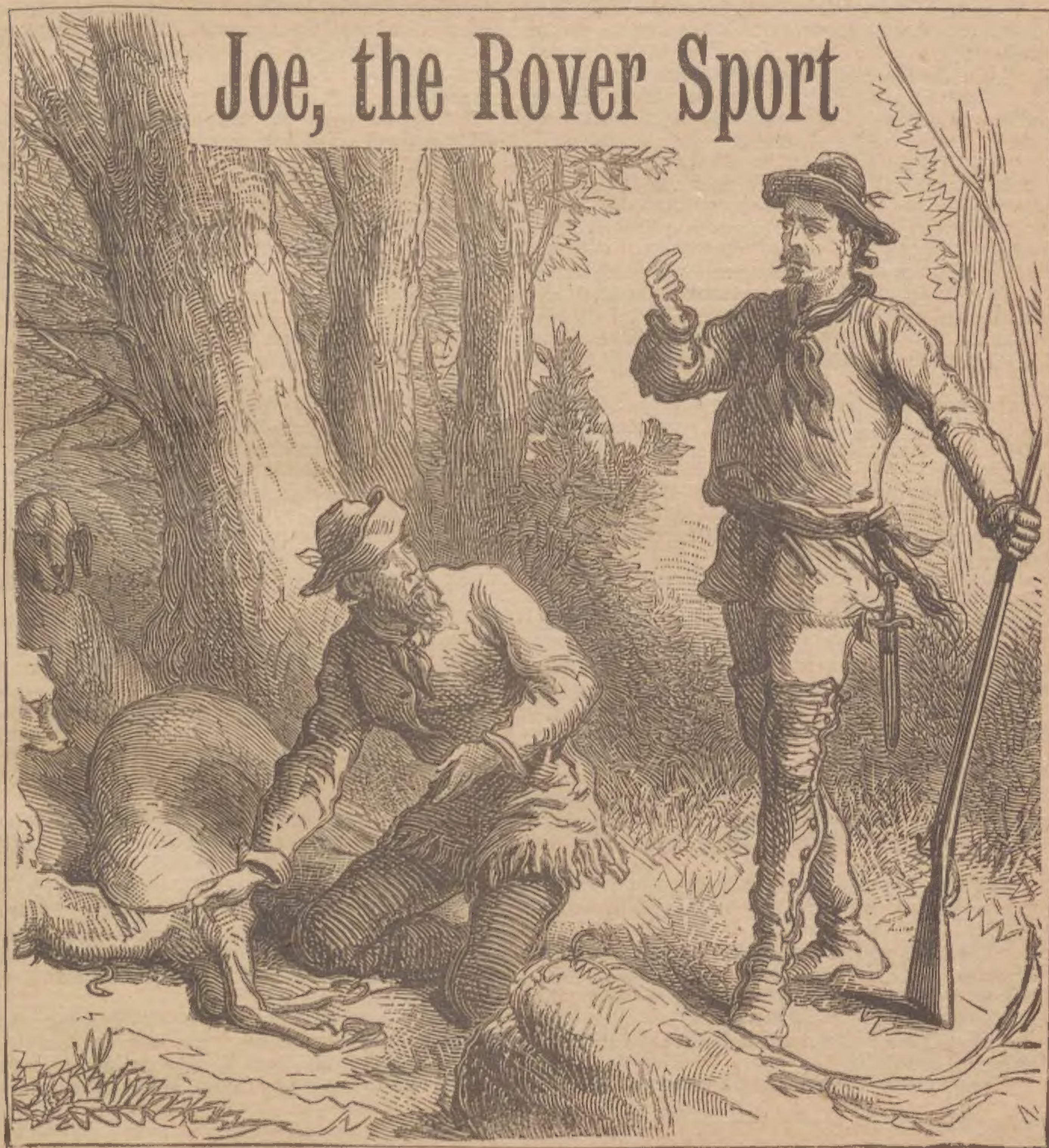
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Joe, the Rover Sport;

OR,

THE FORTUNE HUNTER.

BY A. H. POST,

AUTHOR OF "ROVING JOE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A CURIOUS CAPTURE.

"WELL, what's up?" demanded a tall, rather slender young fellow, as he burst into the little opening, his face flushed and heated as though from a long and hard run.

"You've got eyes, boy—look an' see what you kin make of it fer yourself," was the short reply.

A quick, comprehensive glance around, then a low whistle broke from the lips of the young fellow.

"Old Nailer gone—and blood-marks!"

"Any fool could see that much," was the short comment of the veteran. "But *how* did it go? *Who* tuck it? An' *why*?"

"Old Eph. On his foot. Because he couldn't help himself," laughed the other, amused by the sober face of his comrade.

"Which goes to show that you ain't hafe as smart as you think ye be," retorted the veteran. "I don't reckon you'll ever git over that fool-trick o' yours o' jumpin' at conclusions, 'stead o' spellin' over a big word afore you try to per-nounce it. Look ag'in, and look cluss. The big trap's gone, but it wasn't no b'ar as tuck it off."

His curiosity excited, and, maybe, his pride just a little touched, the youngster bent closer over the "sign" and sought to puzzle out its meaning.

While the young trapper was thus engaged, his comrade seemed ill at ease, his keen gray eyes roving restlessly around the spot, as though he suspected danger in the air.

This was the third season that had found Roving Joe in the trapping grounds, and like many another young fellow before him, he thought that what he didn't know about the business was hardly worth learning. Old Sabe Sollars, himself an expert trapper for nearly half a century, took pleasure in letting his young mate down a notch or two, whenever the occasion presented itself, but just now he failed to extract much pleasure from the operation.

"Some kind of an animal has been caught here," said Joe, looking up. "You found it, and took it out. What did you do with the trap?"

"When I come here, it was gone, an' all things jest as you see 'em now," was the short reply.

"Then the trap has been robbed!" exclaimed Roving Joe. "Some one wearing moccasins has been here. They tried to hide their sign, but left enough to tell that much."

A short, hard laugh burst from the lips of the veteran.

"The critter az stole that trap won't feel like

tryin' of the same trick on ag'in in a hurry, be sure o' that!"

Roving Joe glanced from the blood-marks up into the face of his partner, his bronzed cheek paling a little.

"You found him here—"

"Wish I *hed*—but I didn't. See here: we set that trap to ketch a big b'ar which hes bin snoopin' round here fer the last two weeks. 'Stead o' ketchin' him, a durned Injun stumbles into the trap. Ef he was only alone, 'twouldn't be much matter. 'Tain't no one man as kin take a trap like that off o' his own leg, nur yit do much travelin' afore the eend comes. But critters like them don't run around much in the winter time by thar own selves. An' let this varmint git to his mates, how long 'll it be afore they'll be huntin' round fer them as sot that trap?"

"So much the worse for themselves, unless they come in a crowd too big for us to handle," muttered Joe, with a frown. "We've struck too good a thing here to run away from it without a fight. You can go, if you like, but I won't!"

"When I take to runnin', you won't be fur ahind, boy. But the fust thing is to see ef we cain't git back our trap. I'll lift the trail. You keep a look-out ahead. The critter left here not more'n an hour ago, an' he won't travel fast nur fur with that fifty pounds onto his hoof."

Roving Joe could readily comprehend that. The big bear-trap weighed at least half-a-hundred, and though the Indian—if Indian the luckless fellow was—had tried to hide all traces, the blood had soaked through the covering of dust, and it was plain that he must have been seriously injured by the tooth-armed jaws of the trap. Still he had cast off the clog which had been fastened to the chain, and crawling or hobbling away, had covered up his trail as completely as the nature of the ground would admit. It was plain enough that his progress must be as slow as it was painful, and the two trappers set out with the expectation of soon overtaking the involuntary trap-thief.

As he proceeded, Sabe Sollars grew more cheerful.

"Looks like the p'izen cuss was all alone, a'ter all!" he finally muttered. "Ef he hed any mates nigh to hand, he wouldn't stick out as long as this. He'd find a place whar he could make a fight of it, ef crowded, then send up a smoke or somethin' to tell his fri'nds that he was in trouble. Sense he hain't done that, I reckon we'll only hev the one varmint to tackle."

"What do you mean to do with him when we do find him, Sabe?" asked Joe, almost surely knowing the answer beforehand.

A savage scowl was the only reply the veteran vouchsafed. He was an inveterate Indian-hater. With him, the only good Indian was a dead Indian. He had suffered severely at their hands, not only in person, but through those near and dear to him.

Roving Joe said no more, but his face was sober as they proceeded. He had no cause for loving any Indian, but he was young and not overly hard-hearted. More than once he had

been where it was either kill or be killed, and had then managed to do his duty, without any very serious qualms troubling him afterward, but if the prediction of old Sabe were to prove true—if the trap-thief was found as they expected, killing him would look terribly like murder.

For half an hour the veteran carefully picked out the trail, where the unfortunate Indian had striven to conceal it but after that, the work was easy enough.

"The eend ain't fur off, now," said Sollars, with a grim chuckle, pointing to the plain imprint of hands and the marks of dragging feet. "The p'izen critter is gittin' sick of it! Keep your eye skinned now. He'll be takin' to kiver afore many more rods. Ef he sights us fust, he'll try to slip a arrer through one o' us."

But keenly as they scanned the ground ahead of them, the two trappers were surprised, after all. A sharp twang—a peculiar whistling sound—and Sabe Sollars leaped swiftly aside as an arrow grazed his ribs in passing between his left arm and side.

With the same motion his heavy rifle was raised, but his sidelong leap had carried him almost against Roving Joe, who knocked the weapon down, crying:

"Don't shoot—his bow is broken!"

Such was indeed the fact. The luckless fellow had taken to cover when he saw that he must be overtaken, but he had pressed on until too late to find a secure hiding-place. As he partially arose to fire his first shot, the loose earth gave way beneath his weight, and before he could save himself, he fell headlong, his bow-string snapping against a rock.

He now lay in the open, glaring at the two trappers like a cornered wild beast, one hand doubled beneath him. In the other were several arrows, useless for defense now that his bow was disabled. Of other weapons, none were visible. If he had borne firearms, he must have hidden them by the way.

"Let loose, boy!" snarled the old trapper, his eyes aglow with a light that was deadly in the extreme. "Don't you do that ag'in, or you'll git hurt. It's only a Injun, an' though I don't set sech a monstrous high value onto my life, I do hold it above sech a p'izen varmint as that."

"He is helpless. To shoot him now would be murder!"

"Murder be durned! Didn't he steal our trap—"

Roving Joe burst into a laugh. He could not help it, though he saw that old Sabe was terribly in earnest. If the poor fellow was a trap-thief, he was a most unwilling one.

"Next thing you'll be wantin' to turn the varmint loose altogether," growled the veteran. "'Tain't no time to be playin' the fool now. Ef you'd held your hand, the dirty job'd bin over by now. Stan' aside—let me putt an eend to it."

But Roving Joe still kept his hand on the weapon.

"Not that way," he said, firmly. "It would be foul murder, and even you would be sorry for it as soon as your blood grew cool. The poor devil is helpless—look at his leg!"

As the Indian lay with his left side toward them, the two trappers could see that his right

leg had been caught just above the ankle by the teeth-armed jaws of the bear-trap, and the manner in which the foot was doubled over showed plain enough that the bones had been shattered by the grinding jaws.

"It 'd be a marcy to him, as well as the savin' o' us," doggedly muttered Sollars.

"And you think that's what he would do to one of us if he had us in the same fix?"

"Sartin sure!" was the quick response. "An' thank the devil, his daddy, fer givin' him the chaine, too!"

"And you would be guilty of the same crime!—would act the same as an Indian? I thought you hated them too much for that!" said Joe, springing his trap suddenly; but if he hoped to laugh the veteran out of his deadly resolve, he soon realized his mistake.

"Foolin' enough, boy—let loose your grip, or you'll git hurt!" growled Sollars.

The lad obeyed, but it was only to leap back a pace, still keeping between the old trapper and the crippled Indian, his own rifle cocked and half-leveled. His brown eyes were aglow, and his temper was fully aroused.

"Shoot him, and I'll shoot you!" cried Roving Joe, clearly meaning every word that he said. "I'd rather pull up stakes and go back home empty-handed than see you murder a helpless man like that."

Roving Joe was slow to rouse, but when he did get fairly stirred up, seldom stopped to count the cost. Luckily for one, or both, Sabe Sollars had known him from early childhood, and in his rough way looked upon the lad much as he would a son of his own. He saw that the boy was in deadly earnest, and, though a more daring, fearless man never lived than the old trapper, he now gave way, more for Joe's sake than his own.

"Next thing you'll be wantin' to tote the p'izen cuss to camp, an' thar nuss him up like a suckin' baby!" he muttered, yielding, but with a bad grace.

"Of course we can't leave him out here, crippled, with a big storm brewing," coolly retorted Joe, taking his victory with a matter-of-course air that was anything but soothing to the vanquished one. "But the first thing is to get that trap loose. Lend a hand, won't you?"

While speaking, Roving Joe advanced, Sabe crying warningly, as the lad approached the Indian:

"Take keer—them p'izen imps cain't be—look at that!"

As Roving Joe reached the side of the Indian and stooped over him, the treacherous rascal drew his hand from beneath him and struck savagely with a knife at the breast of the young trapper.

Luckily for himself, Joe caught a glimpse of the weapon in time to spring erect and back, the keen blade just slitting his clothes with its point. Quick as thought Joe struck the red-skin a heavy blow with his foot, knocking him over backward, and for the time being putting him beyond the power of further mischief.

"Didn't I tell ye so, ye pesky idgit?" half-laughed, half-snarled old Sabe, coming forward with drawn knife. "Better 'a' let me done it at fust—"

"Neither then nor now!" cried Roving Joe.

obstinately. "A sheep would turn on a fellow, with that trap grinding its bones. Lend a hand. Let's get it off before the poor devil comes to."

Sabe Sollars was too utterly disgusted to say a word more, but the snort of which he delivered himself was far more eloquent than simple speech.

Even in their practiced hands it was no easy task to open the jaws of the trap and set the mangled limb at liberty. When it was done, however, old Sabe was in a more agreeable mood. With a low chuckle, he grunted:

"One conserlation—a cast-iron Injun couldn't live many days with a leg like that!"

Roving Joe eyed the mangled limb dubiously. Even his sanguine spirit was depressed at the prospect.

"If the foot was off—can't you do the job, old man?"

"Ef I do, it'll come off right ahind his ears," Sabe averred, viciously.

CHAPTER II.

ROVING JOE'S TWO-LEGGED PET.

A SLIGHT stir on the part of the Indian now announced his return to consciousness, and without replying to the sanguinary remark of old Sabe, Roving Joe took the knife from the relaxed fingers, and made sure that the injured man had no other weapons concealed upon his person.

"Ain't that a monstrous grateful grin onto his sweet mug?" asked old Sabe, with an attempt at sarcasm, as the Indian glared up into the face of the young trapper. "They's only one thing he'd ruther do then to slit your wizen, an' that is to butcher all two both on us!"

"If he can understand your talk, I don't wonder at that," snapped Joe. "Come, be a man. We can't leave the poor devil here. It will storm before morning. He would freeze to death. He can't travel with that leg."

"You ain't fool enough to think o' takin' him to camp?"

"Where else?" defiantly asked the youth.

"Then you kin do the work all by your lone some self!" snapped the veteran. "This chicken don't lift ary finger on a'count of a' Injun, 'cept to send him to never-come-back-ag'in—that's flat!"

"All right. That's plain enough talk. Now listen to me. I'm going to take this fellow under my charge. He's going back to camp with me. If you begrudge him the food he'll eat, I'll divide my rations with him. I won't ask your help again; but bear this in mind:—If you raise a finger against him before he is well enough to take his own part, you lift it against me, and I'll strike back the best I know how. Is that plain enough?"

The two trappers confronted each other, frowning and angry. For a brief space it seemed as though they would come to blows; but then the hard features of old Sabe relaxed.

"Have your own way, boy Joe. But mind ve, 'tain't beca'se I think you in the right that I give way now. Ef you was anybody but your own mother's son, it's a mighty different answer you'd be gittin' from me. Take your own trail. I'll do what I kin to help ye through with the

job, but don't fergit that I warned ye that you'd be sorry fer botherin' with the 'fernal varmint."

On this occasion Roving Joe was wise enough to let well enough alone, and accepted the aid of old Sabe as frankly as though no cloud had ever come between them.

A rude but substantial litter was formed, and placing the crippled Indian upon it, the two trappers bore their burden to the small but comfortable "dug-out," where they made their head-quarters.

When once within, Roving Joe uncovered the injured limb, and surveyed it dubiously. It was enough to awe a far more experienced surgeon than the young trapper. Both bones had been broken, and the surrounding flesh badly bruised and lacerated by those grinding teeth.

"It must come off," he at last decided.

"You'll do the job, old fellow?"

"I will ef I do, but ef I do, jest you let me know won't ye? Not another finger 'll I turn over fer the p'izen critter. Unless you think his leg 'll git well the sooner fer bein' tuck off right smooth ahind his ears, which I'm willin' to do, an' say thank ye into the barg'in!"

Further urging would be a waste of breath, and Roving Joe turned toward the Indian once more. Believing as he did that only a speedy amputation of the injured limb could possibly save the life of the red-skin, he sought to make the man understand his intention. Either the Indian understood the English language, or else Roving Joe chose his signs well, for the answer came quick and decisive.

By signs that were as easy read as though printed, the Indian refused to have the operation performed. Better death than live a cripple.

Roving Joe gave a long breath of relief.

"That settles it, then. If you won't, you won't, and if any harm comes of it, don't blame me!"

To tell the plain truth, Roving Joe was overjoyed at this decision, for though he was careful to conceal all misgivings, he seriously doubted his skill in such an operation. He hustled around and got together such articles as he thought would be necessary in dressing the wound, but he was not allowed to apply them, the sufferer attending to his own wants, with a display of skill that was equaled only by the fortitude he displayed.

"Yas, he's got grit a-plenty, but so hes any other wild beast," grunted old Sabe, true to his prejudices. "'Tain't no two to one the p'izen varmint won't git up afore day an' cut the throats o' all two both on us, jest to show how grateful he is fer all the trouble you've bin a-takin' on his a'count."

Roving Joe did not share this opinion in the least. For an Indian, his new pet was a remarkably fine-looking fellow—tall, athletic, well-proportioned, with a face that would have been deemed handsome even in a white man. He was young, not more than four or five-and-twenty, yet that he had seen hard service was clear alike from the scars on his person and the eagle-plumes which he wore—though the last mark is not so much to be relied upon as some of our border writers would seem to think, since

these war-plumes may be bought as well as earned by warlike deeds.

The next few days passed by quietly enough. The storm for which the trappers had been preparing burst in all its fury, but they were well-sheltered, with an abundance of fuel and provisions, and made the best of matters, leaving their traps to take their chances until the weather should moderate. The Indian seemed the most contented of all, despite the terrible wound he had received, and which must have given him great pain at times.

"Nat'ral he *should*!" sniffed incorrigible Sabe. "Got a good shack over his head an' plenty o' chuck to stuff down his gullet. What greasy hog could ax fer more?"

Roving Joe took great interest in his *protege*, talking with him and making signs as best he knew how, for hours at a time. With scant satisfaction, though. Not a word could he get the savage to utter, not a sign to show that he was properly grateful for the benefits he had received. Only that stolid, stony silence. Not a smile or a glance to show that the kindness was appreciated, but the young trapper did not relax his efforts on that account, still hoping to make a favorable impression.

At that time Joe was an ardent admirer and implicit believer in Cooper's fiction. He firmly believed that an Indian never forgot either favor or wrong, and felt that he was laying up treasures—if not in heaven, here below. Who could tell? The time might come when this kindness would bear ample fruit. Stranger things had happened.

For a full week the storm lasted, and after the skies cleared and the cold moderated there could be little done with the traps, owing to the great depth of snow.

During this time even old Sabe became somewhat reconciled to having the Indian about, and though for a time he would not leave the dug-out at the same time with Joe, this precaution soon became less strict, and when a month had passed he treated the red-skin almost as one of the family.

Roving Joe had long since given over any further attempt at converting the Indian, whom he named the "Sphinx," from his muteness, and even he had fallen into the belief which old Sabe entertained from the first—that the red-skin would never regain the use of his right leg. In all that time they had never seen him make an effort to use the limb, and so, when something over two months had passed since the accident, the astonishment of the two trappers may be imagined when the Sphinx suddenly rose to his feet and stood before them without the slightest sign of lameness. And not only that, but his long-sealed lips parted, and he spoke, in good English:

"I am well now. What are you going to do with me?"

The two trappers were too greatly amazed to make any immediate reply, and the Indian added:

"The time has come when I can speak. Then I was sick. Now I am well again. You have thought me a surly dog because I did not cry and kiss your hands when you spoke to me. But I am an Indian. You are white men. We

are enemies—always have been, always will be. I did not beg you to save my life. You did that of your own accord, and *you* have cursed me for a red dog almost every day since you brought me here. Was I to be thankful for that?"

"Who axes your thanks, durn ye?" growled Sollars, his eyes glowing, his bronzed cheek flushing hotly. "Fer me, I'd a heap sooner hev your skelp—an' ef you give me too much o' your lip, blamed ef I *don't* hev it, too!"

With a low laugh the Indian held out his empty hands. The action spoke for itself, and old Sabe subsided, ashamed of threatening an unarmed man.

Roving Joe arose, and taking the weapons which had been removed from the person of the Indian when captured, put them into the hands of the Sphinx.

"Let that answer your question. Take your weapons, take what food you wish. You are free as air—free to go or to stay, just as you prefer."

The stern-set countenance relaxed for a moment, and it seemed as though the stoic was but human, after all. His voice was softer as he spoke again:

"You have treated me like a *man*. If an Indian, I am no dog. I am grateful to you. Some day I may be able to prove this. You will see then that an Indian does not forget."

"But *are* you an Indian?" asked Joe, curiously. "Your features are more like those of a white man, and I never saw an Indian who could talk so correctly—"

"I am *all* Indian," was the quick, stern response. "If ever a few drops of white blood run in my veins, they have long since been washed away—"

"By white blood, I reckon," grunted the veteran.

"If so, it was all shed in open fight, not by killing those caught in a trap and then disarmed," was the swift retort. "As for you, listen. I am your enemy. If ever we meet again, either you kill me, or I will take your scalp—"

Sabe Sollars jerked out his revolver, but Roving Joe leaped between the angry enemies, crying:

"None of that! Put up your weapons, or blessed if I don't down ye both! And you, red-skin, bear in mind that this man is my friend and partner. In striking at him, you strike at me, and if you lift a weapon against him, I'll put a hole through you the very next moment—mind that!"

The Indian bowed his head in silence. The veteran also seemed ashamed of his outburst of rage, and replaced his arms.

Roving Joe as quickly cooled down, and said:

"As I told you, you are free to go when and where you please. But first, if you think you owe me anything, answer me a plain question. When you go away from here, will it be to bring a party of your tribe down upon us?"

"Would you believe the word of a poor Indian?"

"Durned ef I would, even though it was

swore to on a stack o' Bibles higher'n the biggest mountain in the range," bluntly declared old Sabe.

Joe likewise had his doubts, but was wise enough to keep them concealed. Could the Indian be trusted after his openly avowed enmity to Sabe Sollars?

The Indian seemed to read this unspoken doubt, for he turned to the young trapper and spoke earnestly:

"To you I give the promise. But you are in danger every day you spend here. Sooner or later you must be discovered, and then you will be killed. You can make a better living in your own country. Stay there. Leave these hills to the red-men, who alone have any right to them. I talk to you now as a true friend. Bad white men come here. They shoot and kill my people. They steal our horses, and then when we strike back, your soldiers come to drive us out of our country. It is war all the time, and if you are found here, you will be the one to suffer for the wrong-doing of others. Go, while you can. You have nothing to fear from me, or from any danger which I can avert, but there are other Indians, and they do not know you."

These words were spoken rapidly, then the Sphinx turned and left the dug-out, striding rapidly away, walking as though he had never known an injury. Roving Joe called after him, but there was no response, and in another minute, the strange man had vanished from view.

Old Sabe was silent and sulky. He plainly deemed his young mate a fool for suffering the Indian to leave them before they were ready to take the back-trail for the settlements, since he would not consent to the surest method of guarding against treachery; in other words, to killing the man.

Joe himself was a little dubious, and for the next few days he kept on his guard whenever going the rounds of his traps, but then the old faith came back again.

Day after day old Sabe prophesied evil, but as often he was proved wrong, and at last, when the spring was fairly opened, and they had not even seen the sign of an enemy, Roving Joe ventured to openly crow over him.

"We ain't out o' the woods yit," was the dogged retort. "They ain't no good Injun but a dead Injun, an' so you'll find it ef you live long enough. Ef that p'izen imp didn't come back with a hull grist o' his fellers, 'twas be'cause he got killed some way on the road. You cain't tell me! Ef he's still alive, we'll see him afore we git through."

The time was to come when Roving Joe would remember that prophecy, and curse his misplaced mercy.

CHAPTER III.

A VISIT FROM PETER VANLOO.

Two men crouching over a small fire in the cool April evening, smoking their pipes and looking the perfect picture of contentment and peace. But it was all outward seeming.

"Snakes a-crawlin', Joel! When I scatter the light, take kiver in the bresh right ahind ye!"

Old Sabe Sollars was the speaker, but not a muscle of his countenance changed, his lips seemed to kiss the stem of his stumpy pipe as closely as ever, and no ears less near than those of Roving Joe could have caught the sounds at all.

Leaning over as if to secure a coal with which to light his pipe, old Sabe scattered the glowing brands with one swift sweep of his hand, then plunged headlong into the nearest cover.

For a brief space there was silence, broken only by the uneasy trampling of the rough little mustangs tethered near.

The winter trapping season was over. Sabe Sollars and Roving Joe were on their way with a valuable lot of peltries to Fort Laramie as their first objective point. That evening they had gone into camp on Running Water, some fifty miles from Laramie.

Being so nearly "out of the woods," they had in a measure relaxed their precautions, when the remarkably keen senses of the veteran trapper told him that there was some person prowling around their camp.

Not a sound or a motion made he, until he was satisfied that his suspicions were well founded, and he could almost exactly locate the prowler. Then he warned Joe and acted promptly, as already recorded.

A few moments of utter silence, then the sound of a human voice came from out the darkness:

"Don't waste good powder an' lead onto a fri'nd, boys!"

"Ef a fri'nd, show yourself, han's up an' empty," quickly cried old Sabe, from a quarter entirely different to that in which he had disappeared. "I've got ye kivered, an' down goes your meat-house if ye try to make a crooked motion!"

"All right—but don't be too brash an' both kill a good fri'nd an' lose a 'pendent fortin all at one lick."

The speaker boldly advanced, and when once in the little clearing, by the faint light still given out by the scattered embers, it could be seen that the stranger was a white man, well-armed but alone.

"Ef it's any gum-game ye're tryin' to play, stranger," cautioned old Sabe, coming forward, his weapons in readiness for instant use, "'twon't save your brain-pan from bein' made a skimmer of—mind that, now!"

"Sarve me mighty right, too!" was the prompt response. "Ef ye ain't hully satisfied, thar's two o' ye. Let one keep guard over me, while the other takes a scoot around the diggin's an' see ef thar's any more o' my kind layin' 'round loose in the grass. That's the shortest way, an' it'll save a heap o' talkin'."

"Keep him close kivered, Joe, an' blow a hole clean thro' him ef I give the signal," said old Sabe, seeming to approve of the suggestion.

The stranger stood like a statue, his hands elevated and facing the point where Roving Joe lay hidden. If not w'olly on the square, he was gifted with an abundance of nerve.

Ten minutes later, Sabe Sollars entered the camping ground, and satisfied that all was right, Roving Joe also advanced, while the stranger observed:

"Reckon 'twon't do no hurt to lower my dukes now, will it?"

A short grunt from the veteran gave the desired permission, but old Sabe said nothing until after he had gathered up the scattered brands and blown them into a blaze.

"Waal," he said, after a deliberate survey of the stranger, "you don't look so much like a nat'ral born durn fool, but ef ye hain't acted like one, then I don't claim to be no jedge. 'Nother minnit an' thar'd 'a' bin a hole through ye, too big fer patchin'."

"A miss is as good as a mile," was the careless reply. "'Tain't everybody I keered about seein', jest now."

"You carry a gold mine about with you, then?" laughed Joe as he recalled the words spoken by the stranger.

"You've made many a wuss guess then that same, young feller," was the quick reply. "But le's git down to business. You two hev bin trap-pin'?"

"Them shows it," grunted old Sabe, nodding toward the packages of peltries.

"Bound fer the settlements, s'pose?"

A short nod was the only response. Clearly, old Sabe was not falling dangerously in love with this new-found friend.

"The business ain't what it used to be. You won't make a 'pendent fortin out o' your winter's work. Now ef you only knowed what this 'coon does, you'd kick them skins into the fire an' sw'ar you'd never be ketched liftin' a hide ag'in."

"Which we ain't you, nur I don't reckon we'll ever go crazy a-wishin' we was!" snapped the veteran.

The stranger saw that he was on the wrong tack, and as quickly switched off.

"That's all right. I didn't come here fer to pick a fuss. Jest say that ef you won't take up with the offer I'm goin' to make ye, you won't blow on me to anybody else, fer a month to come."

"Wag your tongue or keep it still, jest as the notion strikes ye," bluntly responded Sabe. "We ain't axin' ye to talk, nur we won't make any promises with our eyes shet."

The stranger drew his knife and chipped a few bits from a plug of "black navy," then stared into the fire as he rubbed the tobacco to powder in the palm of his hand. Not until his pipe was filled and smoking did he speak again.

"Short an' sweet, stranger, but I don't reckon they'll break any bones. I've follered you two all day, an' hev had a pritty fa'r chainece to sum ye both up. I don't reckon I'm so fur out o' the way. Anyhow, I'll trust ye."

"Ef anybody was to show ye how a fortin could be picked up, without over much work, you wouldn't turn your back onto it, would ye?"

The two trappers interchanged quick glances, and Roving Joe was the first to reply:

"That depends. Money is good enough, but a good deal rests on how it is to be earned."

"You must 'a' heard talk about thar bein' heaps o' gold in the hills, hain't ye?"

"Plenty o' talk, but no signs," grunted old Sabe. "All the gold they is thar you could putt in your eye, an' never wink ther wuss fer it—them's *my* idees."

"So I used to talk, but live an' l'arn," was the cool response. "They not only is plenty o' gold thar, but inside as a week, I could putt my two han's onto a pile that would break a mule's back."

Roving Joe grew interested, but Sabe Sollars was still skeptical. There was a half-grin on his hard features as he deliberately surveyed the stranger from head to foot.

"Jest to look at ye, a body wouldn't think ye was lousy with gold. They'd rather think it was one o' them old-style scare-crows they used fer to stick up in the co'n-fields."

The stranger laughed shortly as he looked at his ragged suit and softly patted the rusty, broken-stocked rifle which lay across his lap.

"I don't look rather sumptuous, sure enough; but when a body's hed grim death a-scratchin' at his back fer two days an' nights without ary let-up, an' knowin' that only the len'th o' his legs kin save his skelp, it don't leave much spar' time to primp up—now does it?"

Old Sabe vouchsafed no answer, but Roving Joe's curiosity was fully aroused, and he said:

"You've had a turn-up with the reds, then?"

"I'm the only one left," was the terse response.

At this old Sabe roused up. They were still in the Indian country, and if the words of this fellow could be depended on, they were by no means out of danger.

"How long ago was this, an' how fur from this did ye shake 'em off?" he demanded, sharply.

"Too long an' too fur to give ye any oneasiness to-night, fri'nd," was the quick response. "Three days ago I see'd the last on 'em. But you was sayin' that thar wasn't no dust in the Black Hills, or words to that effect. Now jest hear to me."

"Three year ago this comin' grass, a party o' six men made up to take a run into the Injun kentry, tradin' as they said. One of 'em was a squaw-man, an' that give 'em a freer swing then they could 'a' got any other way. They tuck along a good deal o' tradin' truck, an' to make all sure, the other five boys hitched onto squaw wives."

"We ain't Injun traders, nur we ain't sp'ilin' to be, nuther," growled the veteran. "Ef that's the kind o' gold mine, I don't reckon we'll take any stock into it."

"The tradin' an' the squaw part of it was only jest a kiver to the rest. That-a-way they got into the hills, an' wasn't long afore they struck what they went after, nuther."

"The story the squaw-man told them was true enough. The hills was chuck full o' gold, an' afore the fust snows fell, the gang hed not only marked out the best place fer workin' the next season, but they hed cleaned up more dust then ary one o' the lot hed ever see'd afore at one time. 'Course they kept it all a cluss secret from the reds. The Injuns ain't sech fools but they knows what follers when white men git the scent o' gold-diggin's. The squaw-man said that the tribe his wife belonged to hed knowed of the gold for more years then she could count, but that they hed kept cluss guard over it, not diggin' any themselves, fer they was too lazy, an' didn't know how, anyway, while they took good keer to rub out all sech trappers an' strag-

glers as happened to find out the secret afore they could git away an' spread the story.

"Next spring the boys was to work airly, with the tools they hed contrived to smuggle into the Hills without the Injuns s'pectin' what they was after. Long afore cold weather come they hed made thar pile, an' was talkin' of strikin' out fer good, when a pile o' red-skins jumped them. Thar wasn't no chainece fer fightin', an' not much more fer runnin'. Three o' the gang was throwed in thar tracks, but the others lit out.

"One o' them was killed in the chase that follered, an' both the others bad hurt afore they got away; so bad that one died on the road, an' only my brother Jim lived to reach the settlements.

"It was spring afore he got well enough to look me up, an' tell me his story. I promised to help him git the dust, an' we was nearly ready to set out, when Jim was laid on his back ag'in by his hurts. He hung on ontel last fall, when he died. But afore he went, he drawed up two plans o' the place whar the gold was hid, givin' me one of 'em. By help o' this, an' the long talks we hed when he was too sick to do much else, I know I kin go straight to the spot whar the dust is waitin' fer a owner."

"Why hain't ye done it then, afore this?" asked old Sabe.

"That's what I'm comin' to now," was the quick response. "Nothin' couldn't be did in winter, 'long o' the snow kiverin' up all the land-marks, but I tuck two good men into the secret with me, an' we got a airly start this spring. We got into the Hills right enough, but thar luck failed us. We run onto a gang o' Sioux Injuns, an' my two mates were rubbed out. I got shet of them with my life an' skelp, but that's all. I studied the matter over, an' made up my mind to make one more try fer it, anyhow. I was bound fer Laramie, to pick up a mate or two, when I run acrost you fellers, an' thought I'd give ye the fust chainece."

"You say you have a plan of the place where the gold was hidden?" asked Roving Joe, who had evinced strong interest in the recital. "Let's have a look at it—"

"When the barg'in's made 'll be time a-plenty," was the meaning response. "Say you two'll go in with me, an' then we will talk about the plan. That's fair enough, ain't it?"

Not even old Sabe could find fault with this precaution. Despite the sharp tenor of his interruptions, the veteran had listened with deep interest to the story told by the stranger, for it bore the impress of truth on its face, but he did not bely his reputation for caution by taking a single item for granted.

"Afore we go any funder," he said, quietly, "s'pose you give us a idea how much the thing will pan out, ef we kin git safe through with it."

"More then you could make in a lifetime at the traps. The boys didn't hev any way to git at the exact weight o' the dust, but at a cluss guess, Jim said it wouldn't run fur to either side o' three hundred pounds."

The two trappers stared at the speaker in open-mouthed amazement, scarce able to believe their ears. The stranger repeated his words,

and Roving Joe made some hasty scratches on the ground with a stick, then exclaimed:

"Sixty-five thousand dollars!"

"Thar or tharabouts—yas. But to keep within bounds, call it a even sixty. I kin find the spot easy enough, ef it wasn't fer the Injuns; but a man cain't expect to pick up no sech pile as that without some sort o' trouble or drawback.

"Now, I tell ye what I'll do, ef you agree to help me git this pile, I'll give up one hafe of it fer ye to divide atween you. That's fair enough, ain't it?"

Roving Joe nudged old Sabe as a sign for him to close at once with the astonishing offer, but the veteran took it more coolly.

"Thar's the peltries," he said, slowly. "They're a sure thing, the other ain't. Mebbe we could find it, mebbe we couldn't. Mebbe the Injuns 'd find us fust. They did clean out two gangs, 'cordin' to your own a'count."

"Of course thar's resk," frankly replied the stranger. "Ef thar wasn't, I'd make the riffle by myself, 'stead o' 'vidin' up with anybody else. But look at it in this light. You hev bin runnin' the resk o' your lives every day this winter fer a few skins that'll at the best only bring you in a few hundred dollars. Ef we hev good luck, inside o' two weeks we will be back out o' ther hills, with enough fer you ter spend the rest o' your life in ease. Ef bad luck—waal, a trapper must expect to turn his toes up, sooner or later, ye know."

"Ef the boy'll agree to one thing, an' you to another, I'm in wid yer," slowly added the veteran. "Joe kin take in the pelts, sell 'em an' wait fer us a month ef we don't git back sooner. You'll give me one half what we find, an' I'll divide up with Joe—"

"Joe don't take what he doesn't earn," shortly said the youth. "If you go, I go too—that's settled."

"The young feller's right," said the stranger, positively. "We need the hosses, an' we cain't a'ford to lose the time it'd take to go to the Post an' back ag'in. Besides, somebody mought smoke our plans, an' we don't want to do any more dividin' up. No—take my offer jest as it is, or else leave it. I kin find somebody else, I reckon—"

There was some further talk, but the two trappers were already trapped, and the point of Peter Vanloo, as he gave his name, was gained.

It was agreed to bury the peltries that same night, and take the back trail early in the morning. After the first day, the better to guard against discovery by straggling bands of Indians, they would travel mainly by night.

These points settled, Peter Vanloo showed them the plot drawn by the dead gold-seeker, and not a little to the satisfaction of all concerned, Sabe Sollars declared that he recognized the spot, and could lead the way direct.

"Ef we kin find the dust as easy, we're all right," he said, with a chuckle of grim delight.

CHAPTER IV.

FORTUNES AND MISFORTUNES.

THE course decided upon was carried out as nearly as circumstances would permit, the

treasure-seekers doing the greater part of their traveling by night, laying low in the daytime. From the outset Dame Fortune seemed inclined to favor them, and the hills were entered without a living soul, white, red or black, being sighted, or even a fresh trail to excite their alarm.

As a general thing, they kept to what has since become known as the "Cheyenne Trail," leading into the Black Hills by way of the Red Canyon, through what is now known as the Pleasant Valley, and directly over the spot where Custer City now stands. At that time, it is hardly necessary to say, the entire region was a desert, so far as human inhabitants were concerned.

As the fortune-hunters penetrated deeper into the hills, they found many evidences that went far to prove that they were not the first white men who had ventured to explore that wild region in quest of golden treasure. Every here and there they could see where the daring prospectors had been at work in search of the yellow dust. Here a few "prospect-holes," yonder a dilapidated and decaying line of sluice-boxes. The work of white men beyond any reasonable doubt, for the Indian who will delve in the soil for gold, and who understands the principles of hydraulics sufficiently well to apply them to disengaging and separating the gold-dust from the enveloping sand and dirt, if born, assuredly has not been found as yet.

Some of these signs had undoubtedly been left by the party to which the brother of Peter Vanloo belonged, while other "sign" was noticed which was of still older date. Who these pioneer gold-seekers of the Black Hills were, will no doubt forever remain a mystery. Doubtless the majority if not all of them, fell a sacrifice to the vengeance of the Indians. If not, why was the golden secret kept so long and closely? Nearly forty years ago, the Sioux Indians were known to have golden nuggets, which was plainly not California gold.

But Roving Joe and his mates did not trouble themselves greatly over these questions. What interested them far more, was the finding of the *cached* gold of the Vanloo party.

So carefully was the plan drawn, so minute had been the verbal directions of Jim Vanloo, that the treasure-seekers experienced but little difficulty in finding the abandoned placer-diggings, which were on Rapid Creek, the largest stream in the Black Hills, and not many miles above where Camp Crook was to arise in after years.

All around them was scattered "sign" that could not be misread. Partly filled-up prospect-holes, spots where the "pay-dirt" had been stripped from the bed-rock, a line of rudely constructed sluice-boxes, now half-destroyed and in places bearing the marks of bear or wolf teeth.

So far all had been plain sailing, but now the smiles of fickle fortune turned to frowns. When the fortune-hunters looked for the spot indicated on the little chart, as that in which the golden treasure had been hidden, nothing that at all answered the description could be found!

For the first few minutes, the life of Peter

Vanloo was in no little peril, for both Sabe Sollers and Roving Joe began to believe that they had been deceived for a purpose, but there was no acting in the angry surprise and chagrin exhibited by the man. Clearly he too had been deceived, if they had.

"That brother o' yours was a monstrous lucky cuss to kick the bucket jest as he did, Pete," said old Sabe, grimly. "I ain't a man as holds a grudge, but I'd walk a few hundred miles in my two bar' feet jest to git even with the p'izen whelp as would play sech a durned fool trick onto a white man: I would so!"

Peter made no reply. He was even worse cut up about the matter than either of the others. Surely he had been shamefully deceived; and yet, what was the object? All around them were signs of gold-digging, which could not be mistaken. So far the story of his dead brother was confirmed.

Right there the mystery was solved, though unconsciously, by Roving Joe.

"Looks like a young earthquake had been turned loose among these hills," he exclaimed. "It must be a healthy spot during a thunder storm. Look at those trees; half of them have been struck by lightning—"

A sharp cry from Peter Vanloo cut him short.

"That's it! I didn't think Jim could be lyin'. Look around—you kin see that thar has bin some awful storms here sence they left. That hill has bin knocked down, an' so kivered the *cache* all up!"

"Mebbe so, but we ain't no better off then ef thar hedn't never bin none," growled old Sabe, yet with evident relief at this proof that he had not been made a fool of altogether.

"Ef the dust is thar—an' I hain't no manner o' doubt but what it is—three hundred pounds o' solid gold is well wuth some diggin'," cried Peter Vanloo, with a dogged earnestness. "'Course you fellers kin do jest as you take a notion, but ef the red-skins keep thar own side o' the fence long enough, I'm goin' to hev that dust, or root over the hull durn mount'in—you hear me!"

The two trappers were not quite so enthusiastic, but their doubts grew steadily less as the situation was more carefully reviewed. Though a considerable amount of earth had fallen, and it was almost certain that the *cache* itself had been shifted by the land-slide, they began to believe that a few days of steady and hard work would be sufficient to remedy the misfortune and uncover the deposit.

Leaving Peter Vanloo and Roving Joe to locate the spot as accurately as possible under the circumstances, Sabe Sollers set off on a scout, to see if there was any danger to be apprehended from prowling Indians. After half a day thus spent he returned to his mates with the agreeable information that he had not seen a single sign, fresh or old.

Bright and early the next morning the treasure-seekers set to work at the point which was decided as the most likely to bring to light the desired "find."

The events of the ensuing week may be briefly summarized. Each day old Sabe, as the most skillful, took a scout around the vicinity, while

the others kept steadily at work. Each morning they felt sanguine that success would reward their efforts ere darkness came; each night they knocked off work believing that one more day would surely find their reward. Peter Vanloo would not suffer them to despair. Whenever his mates grew gloomy he would dwell upon the golden treasure and all the pleasures it held in store for them. It would enable them to pass the remainder of their lives in ease, if not affluence. And when he ceased speaking the two trappers would turn in, ready for another hard day's work on the morrow.

But the end was even nearer than any one of them suspected. Their stock of provisions were growing low, and as it had been decided that no powder should be burned while in the Hills, unless it was absolutely necessary to save life, old Sabe had spent his evenings in manufacturing a stout bow and arrows, hoping to kill enough game with them to last them until they were ready to take the back-trail.

Early on the morning of the day in question, Sabe Sollars sallied forth, taking his side-arms with the bow and arrows, but leaving his rifle at camp.

Though game, both small and large, was very abundant in the Hills, old Sabe did not find the duty of forager an easy one, with his rude weapons, and the day was considerably more than half spent before he made a *coup*.

For several hours he had been trying to steal within sure arrow-range of a small band of elk, knowing that one lucky shot at such big game would furnish meat enough to last them fairly out of the Hills. But the animals were restless, though he saw plain enough that they had not taken alarm at him.

"The durned critters hev bin thar afore," he muttered in disgust, as he saw them sheer away from the covert in which he lay, thinking to obtain a shot as they fed past. "Ef they hain't see'd or smelt red-skins within the day, then I ain't no jedge— That's the ticket, durn ye!" he exclaimed, barely above his breath as the noble creatures turned and walked slowly toward his place of ambush.

Old Sabe fairly held his breath as the elk slowly advanced, stopping now and then to nip a bit of grass, for already they were not much more than twenty yards away. Closer crouched the hunter, his bow half-bent, his keen eyes searching for an unguarded point where a shot would be fatal.

Then the leader, a huge, wide-antlered stag, turned half-around to brush off a fly, exposing his side, and the hard drawn arrow sped on its mission of death.

Sollars saw the weapon strike just behind the fore-shoulder, burying half its length in the quivering flesh. The elk gave one mighty leap, then plunged headlong to the ground, while its fellows stared in stupid amazement, as yet failing to realize the danger.

The old trapper was not one to slaughter indiscriminately, and as he had all the meat that was needed, he arose from his covert, dropping the bow and drawing his knife to bleed his game.

The spell was broken, and the remaining elk leaped away with loud whistles of alarm. But

old Sabe did not favor them with even a passing glance, for he saw that the stag was beginning to struggle in the attempt to arise, and fearful of losing the reward of his patient toil, after all, he rushed forward and grasped the animal by the horns, plunging his keen knife into its throat, almost severing its head with a single sweeping slash.

Knowing that his work was done, the veteran leaped aside to avoid the floundering of the dying creature—and that abrupt movement doubtless saved his life.

Sharp, stinging pains seemed to assail him in every limb, and he heard a sharp explosion, falling headlong at the same instant. As by instinct, Sabe knew that he had been shot and seriously injured. Mingling with the echoes of the firearms, he could hear shrill yells of savage exultation, but it was like one in a horrible night-mare. His brain was whirling; he believed he was dying. He knew that Indians were rushing from their ambush upon him, each eager to be the first one to claim his scalp. Yet he could not move—he could not make even the attempt to draw a weapon with which to defend himself.

The Indians were three in number, two running side by side, the third a few feet behind, all racing as though for dear life. Seeing that he now stood no chance of being the first one to reach and touch the body, the latter leaped aside and flung his knife past the leaders—not point but haft foremost. The weapon sped true to its mark, striking old Sabe a smart blow on the elbow. Instantly and with little yells of disappointment the leaders stopped, accidentally coming into violent contact, both stumbling and falling.

It was a curious affair throughout, but one which may be readily explained, though, so far as I am aware, no writer has mentioned the peculiar change which has been made in the unwritten rules of savage warfare of recent years.

When the bow was the principal weapon used by all red-skins, each warrior had his distinctive mark or totem, which was known to the entire tribe, and with which each and all of his arrows were marked. Thus, by a single glance at the weapons, it could be told who had dealt the death-blow, and the honors awarded accordingly; but since the use of firearms has become general among the Indians, this method of giving the honor to whom honor was due, could no longer come into play. Now it is not absolutely necessary to kill an enemy before a scalp can be won, since that belongs to the person who first touches, with his own person, or any of his weapons (though a "coup stick" is generally carried for that express purpose) the dead body of the foe. When the latter is used, no matter whether held in hand or flung ahead of the owner, there will be no dispute about the scalp, even though the one so claiming the scalp has not fired a shot, nor is it often that the claim backed by any weapon, as in this instance, finds a disputant.

This is a digression, but as it illustrates a custom not generally known, besides having an important influence over the fate of old Sabe, the kind reader must pardon it.

Seeing that their comrade had "made his coup," the two leaders gave up the contest, but in trying to check themselves came in contact with each other, and fell headlong, the lucky warrior passing by them and stooping to take the scalp he had won.

The knife as it struck his elbow, seemed to break the spell which his wounds had flung over the veteran, and the Indian gave a yell of alarm as the supposed dead man rolled over on one side, drawing, cocking and discharging a revolver all with a single motion as it seemed.

The cry of alarm was changed to a howl of death-agony as the red-skin staggered back, the life blood spurting from over his heart in a scarlet stream.

No less amazed were the other savages by this sudden alteration of what they had doubtless considered a "picnic." Their comrade dead or dying—the trapper scrambling to his feet, very unlike a dead man. But they drew their knives and hatchets and darted forward, knowing that their only hope lay in coming speedily to close quarters, since they had cast their rifle aside in their eagerness to secure the coveted trophy. Dizzy, half-blind and feeling weak from the effects of his wounds, the veteran received them with a rapid fusillade, but only one of his shots proved fatal, and the third red-skin closed with him, dodging a shot that fairly blackened his face with the burning powder.

This swift movement made his own blow uncertain, and old Sabe only received a glancing cut on one shoulder from the keen tomahawk. Before the stroke could be repeated, the half-stunned trapper grappled with his antagonist, and tight locked in each other's arms, they fell to the ground, rolling over and over in a struggle that could end only in death.

Partially disabled though he was, the veteran proved a most awkward customer to handle, and as they fought like wild beasts, his senses grew clearer, his great strength returned, and his sinewy fingers closed upon the savage's windpipe with a death-gripe.

The struggle was brief, and lucky for Sollars that such was the case, for all the time the Indian was plying his knife with all the energy of despair. Most fortunately the combatants had brought up against a rock, in rolling over, with the savage underneath, and thus his knife-hand was seriously hampered, else the matter would soon have ended disastrously for the trapper.

As it was, when the red-skin finally gave way, black in the face, his eyes and tongue protruding from his bleeding lips, Sabe Sollars was gashed and bleeding from a score of wounds. Rising up to his knees, the veteran drew his knife and sent its long blade searching for the heart of his antagonist, then staggered to his feet, panting, sick and faint.

The instinct of an old trapper made him seek cover and reload his revolver, first of all, lest the sounds of burning powder should bring other enemies down upon him. Then he inspected his wounds.

So far as a hasty examination could answer, old Sabe believed that he had not received any wounds which were necessarily fatal, though he seemed to be bleeding from every pore. Two

bullets had struck him, but fortunately there were no bones broken.

With a dogged resolution peculiarly his own, the veteran, wounded as he was, cut a chunk of meat from the carcass of the elk, binding it upon his shoulder with a strip of hide, then took up his weary, painful course to the distant camp.

It was nearly sundown when he reached his destination, haggard as a ghost, covered with blood from head to foot, the very picture of walking death. Gasping and breathless, he sunk down unable for a time to answer the countless questions which Roving Joe and Peter Vanloo showered upon him.

"Jest Injuns, that's what it amounts to," he finally said. "Gold or no gold, we've got to skin out o' here right smart, onless we want to lose our skelps."

Bit by bit the veteran managed to tell his story, while Joe was washing and bandaging his wounds. There were few comments made. They all could realize the extent of the peril which threatened them. Even if not found by some straggling party of their tribe, the dead Indians would soon be missed and searched for. And then the trail of the destroyer would be followed to the bitter end.

"I'm willing enough to pull out, just as soon as you're able to travel, old fellow," said Roving Joe, promptly enough. "I never was cut out for a digger, and I don't believe there ever was a grain of dust in the Hills—so there!"

"I kin travel now, better a heap then when my wounds git all stiffened up—"

Roving Joe checked him peremptorily.

"That's worse than nonsense. We'd have a dead man on our hands before we traveled a dozen miles. No—Injuns or no Injuns, here we've got to stick until you can get back a little of the blood you've lost."

Peter Vanloo said nothing, one way or the other, until the question was settled by Roving Joe, then he coincided with the latter. At any other time, his strange behavior would have excited suspicion, and, indeed, all that day he had acted so unlike his usual self, that Joe had grown suspicious of him, meaning to have a talk with Sabe when he returned, but the matter now slipped his mind.

Sabe Sollars, more through his weakness of body than because he was convinced by the arguments of his young mate, yielded to the majority. They were to keep close in camp, one man being on guard at a time, both night and day, until the veteran gained strength sufficient to undertake the long and arduous trip through the Hills.

That night Peter Vanloo volunteered to stand the first turn as guard, and as Sabe preferred Roving Joe as nurse, and since he was beginning to grow somewhat feverish, it was finally settled that Peter should serve as sentinel the whole night, leaving Joe free to attend to the veteran.

The hours dragged along wearily enough to Roving Joe, as he watched beside his old friend, who was in an uneasy and feverish slumber. It must have been midnight, though the young trapper could almost have sworn that it was

time for the sun to show itself, when old Sabe roused up, muttering:

"The durned p'izen cuss! He's run off an' left us here in the trap! From the very fust I knowed they wasn't no good into him!"

"That's all right, old fellow," said Roving Joe, soothingly, for he believed that the wounded man was wandering in his mind. "We're a heap better off without him."

"But the gold—he's found it!" exclaimed Sabe, striving to arise, and only kept from doing so by the exertion of all his nurse's strength. "An' the hosses—they're gone!"

"No, no, old fellow, they're all right. Pete is watching them. You've been dreaming. Take a sup of cold water, and try to sleep again. You know you must get strong—"

Sabe Sollars yielded, completely exhausted by the struggle to arise. A moment's silence, then he spoke again, this time slowly and rationally:

"You think I'm flighty, but I ain't. I tell you Pete hes played us dirt. He's found that gold we was lookin' fer, an' he's run away with it, to keep from hev'in' to 'vide it up. Wuss then that, you'll find he's tuck all the hosses, too."

Roving Joe was startled by the positiveness with which these words were spoken, but still he could not believe them, even though his own forgotten suspicions came back to him with redoubled force.

"Will you promise to lay still and not try to get up, while I go bring Pete in to you?" he asked the veteran.

Sabe nodded, and Roving Joe left the rude little "shack."

In a few minutes he returned, his face pale as death, his eyes glowing with poorly suppressed fury.

"You was right, old man. The dirty cuss has run off and left us. Worse than that, he's took every horse with him!"

CHAPTER V.

TRAILING A TRAITOR.

"I KNOWED it!" muttered old Sabe, hoarsely. "Didn't I tell ye so? The low-down whelp 'lowed fer to play dirt onto us from the very set-out, an' now he's done it!"

"He'll never fool another, if I ever set my two eyes on him," said Roving Joe, his voice low and still, but full of a deadly hatred such as he had never before experienced.

"An' that's jest what we've got to do," rejoined old Sabe, raising himself to a sitting posture with a desperate call upon his feeble remnant of strength. "Keep back, boy!" he snapped, as Roving Joe leaped to his side with extended arms. "'Tain't no time to be layin' in bed now. Ef I cain't naver gate my own self—ah!"

While speaking, the veteran rose to his feet, but he had over-estimated his powers, and but for the ready grasp of the young trapper, he would have fallen heavily, being totally unable to stand alone.

"Used up an' done fer!" old Sabe muttered, with a low groan of mingled disgust and despair, as Roving Joe gently lowered him back upon his blankets. "Give me my belt. What ye lookin' so durned s'picious at a feller fer?"

he demanded, as the youth hesitated to comply with his request.

Startled by his angry tones, and fearful that a refusal to humor the wounded man would be attended with evil consequences in his present feverish state, Roving Joe complied.

"They's only one thing to be did," said the veteran, in a more natural tone, as he drew the pistol-belt down close to his side. "That is to foller the dirty sneak an' pay him the wages he hes airnt by this black trick. Jest fer my own self, I wouldn't keer so much. I'm gittin' old an' pritty nigh wore out, anyway. But I told your mother that I'd fetch you back home ag'in, safe an' sound. An' I Liver yit told a lie to a woman."

"Nor will you this time, old fellow," said Roving Joe, cheerfully—far more lightly than his actual feelings justified, if the truth must be told. "It won't be the first time we've had to take a tramp on foot. Just you get a little stronger, and we'll be all right, never fret."

"Long afore that time Dirty Pete will be safe away cut o' our reach," quickly rejoined the veteran. "No, laddy-buck, whatever we do hes got to be did in a hurry. Ef he ain't ketcht af're he gits cl'ar o' the Hills, then he won't be ketcht a-tall, an' we kin whistle fer both our hosses an' our share o' the gold. He'll stick to the trail, fer it's the shortest way out, an' he won't count on our findin' him out much ef any afore day. By smart travelin', even on foot, he mebbe kin be ketcht. An' you must do it, Joe."

"Not if I have to leave you behind, helpless," doggedly muttered the young trapper.

"I'll be safe enough, never fear, laddy-buck," said the veteran, with a short laugh. "Ef you git through all right, tell the old lady I did the best I knowed how to keep the promise I made to her 'bout you. Good-by, laddy-buck!"

As he uttered these last words, Sabe Sollars raised his right hand with a revolver, cocking it and thrusting the muzzle fairly against his temple as he pulled the trigger.

Roving Joe leaped to his side with a cry of horror, but he would have been too late to save the desperate man, had not a merciful Providence intervened.

The hammer fell, but the percussion cap failed to explode. Before the veteran could cock the weapon again, Roving Joe grasped his hand and weapon, gasping:

"Great heavens! Sabe, what are you trying to do?"

One desperate attempt to free his hand, then the old trapper lay utterly exhausted. Roving Joe took the pistol from his nerveless fingers without any further difficulty, and replacing it in the belt, tossed them in the further corner.

"That was a fool trick o' yourn, laddy-buck," said old Sabe, with a faint smile, as the strongly-agitated youth bent over him. "It was the shortest an' surest way out o' the fix. Here I be, all stove up, onable fer to travel or do anythin' else save to make trouble fer you, while all the time that dirty whelp of a Pete is gittin' funder an' funder away with all our critters. An' you swore you wouldn't leave without me. An' I told your mother I'd watch over an' see that you didn't come to no harm which I could anyways hinder."

"Is that any reason why you should murder yourself?" gruffly cried Roving Joe, but turning his head to one side and winking vigorously to clear his dimmed vision. "Now you listen, old fellow; you give me a solemn pledge that you won't try this fool trick again, or I'll set down on you and never get up until you've come back to your sober senses—so now!"

"Promise fer promise, an' it's a whack!" quickly responded the veteran. "Say you'll foller my advice—"

"Let me hear what it sounds like, first," said Roving Joe, guardedly. "If it's to run away and desert you, you may just as well spare your breath, for I won't do it—that's me!"

"Not fer good," was the swift rejoinder. "You kin come back, ef you're so sot onto it, though I'm monstrosly afeared that ef you do, we won't nuther o' us see home ag'in."

"You take the trail we come by. Dirty Pete 'll hev to foller it fer twenty mile, anyway, an' ef you're smart an' actyve mebbe you kin ketch him up afore day. Ef you don't, look cluss when you come to whar the trail forks, fer the p'izen cuss may think to blind ye by takin' the other branch. Foller him to the open, ef ye don't ketch him afore. Then promise me you'll take a good long think-it-over afore ye turn back. Keep it in mind that mebbe I'll not be able to travel fer a month; that the reds may drop down here at any minit; that ef you come back, an' the varmints should smell us out, you couldn't do me any good—only make it harder fer me by knowin' that you hed to go under, too, an' that the mother at home would be blamin' me fer your not comin' home ag'in."

"Think it all over jest as I tell ye, an' be sartin that I'm all the time a-urgin' of ye to strike out fer home."

"There's no use saying any more, Sabe," said Roving Joe, his voice sounding harsh and unnatural as he strove to hide the strong emotion inspired by the devoted self-sacrifice of his comrade. "The rascal has got too long a start for me to catch him up now, and I ain't a-going to run away from you, anyway—that's flat-footed!"

Sabe Sollars raised himself up on one elbow, his unnaturally pale countenance stern-set and his voice full of stern resolution.

"You won't be such a durned fool, laddy-buck. The only hope of our gittin' out o' this scrape alive rests on your ketchin' Dirty Pete afore he gits fa'rly clear o' the hills. Ef you lose any more time that little chaine is dead. An' ef you don't go, I sw'ar that I'll watch my chaine an' blow my own brains out—I will, so help me—!"

There could be no doubting the perfect sincerity with which he spoke, and, knowing him so well, Roving Joe saw that there was nothing left for him but to yield.

"You swear that you won't do yourself any injury while I am gone, then?" he asked, shortly.

"Sartin," was the quick reply. "I'd be a fool to do it when thar was a chaine left of your gittin' back with the critters that dirty cuss stole. Come back with them, an' you'll find me safe enough, unless the reds drap onto me. But ef you can't ketch Dirty Pete don't come back at all. Think o' the mother at home, laddy-buck, an' save your skelp fer her."

Roving Joe was not in the humor for talking, and after placing food and water where the wounded man could help himself as his necessities required, the young trapper left the rule hut and started off on his long and weary trail.

The night was dark, for there was no moon after the first half of the evening, and the trail was by no means an easy one, even under the clear light of the sun; but Roving Joe knew that it was still more difficult traveling for the traitor, since he was not only mounted, but was incumbered with two led horses.

As old Sabe had observed, for the first twenty and odd miles the runaway would be compelled to keep to the main trail, over which they had traveled in coming to Rapid Creek. This he would doubtless do, as he would count on his treachery remaining undiscovered until day dawn.

As rapidly as possible Roving Joe pressed on through the gloom, guided only by the uncertain light of the stars, and so well did he improve the time, that when the first rays of the rising sun came over the eastern hill-tops, the division of the trail was close at hand.

This (according to the best of Roving Joe's recollection, for it must be borne in mind that he has not been in the Black Hills since it was thrown open to settlement, and if any of the streams or landmarks were named then, he was in ignorance of the fact) was near where Custer City now stands, on the north bank of French Creek.

Wetting his parched lips, Roving Joe lay down beside the stream for a few minutes, until the light grew strong enough for him to read what sign the rocky soil had retained.

This proved to be no easy task. Peter Vantloo must have felt confident that he would be followed, either by his deceived mates, or else by the Indians whom he doubtless hoped would not only find but effectually dispose of the two men.

Keenly as Roving Joe might look, he could find no sign that told of the treacherous rascal having passed by that way. Nearly an hour was spent in the vain search near the point where there was a choice of trails by which the Hills might be left on horseback. Then, as his only hope, Roving Joe struck into the trail which led toward the south-east.

"I'll try it for a mile or two, then if I don't hit on his trail, I'll bark back and follow the other branch clear to the open, as old Sabe said. He must have taken one or the other, sure."

This proved to be a lucky choice, for when little more than a mile had been passed over, Roving Joe found a piece of gray army blanket, worn and ragged, and the mystery was solved.

"The cunning rascal has had the critters muffled!" exclaimed the young trapper, stooping low and carefully examining the ground. "There's the print of one hoof—he hasn't noticed the loss as yet, I reckon."

Not a little encouraged, Roving Joe pressed on, keeping a keen look-out, not only along the ground ahead of him, but on all sides as well, for he knew that at any moment he might run afoul of some prowling red-skin who would welcome him too warmly for comfort, unless first discovered.

The trail was very rough and rocky. The pieces of army blankets with which the traitor had muffled the hoofs of the stolen horses were now worn out, bits being dropped at short intervals, until Roving Joe saw where they had been removed altogether and cast into a clump of bushes.

It is not necessary to give a minute record of progress made by the young trapper. Let it suffice to say that he followed the trail after leaving the fork, for something near twenty miles, or until it emerged from the Black Hills, by the natural gateway now known as Buffalo Gap.

Wearily ascending a point of rocks, Roving Joe scanned the plain beyond long and closely. Once he saw, or fancied he saw, something which looked like a horseman, but it almost instantly vanished from view.

"If that was the dirty rascal, he won't travel much further before taking a rest," muttered Roving Joe, settling down in a more comfortable position, to take a little much-needed rest. "It's a new ground to me, but if I'm not mightily mistaken, yonder dark line is a growth of timber, and that means water. If it was Pete I caught a glimpse of, he'll go into camp for the night there. Both he and the critters must be pretty near played by this time."

While resting, Roving Joe weighed the matter well in his mind. He had made a long and rapid journey, and with fatigue added to loss of sleep, he could with difficulty keep his heavy eyelids open.

"It don't look more'n a dozen miles there," he muttered, forcing himself to look at the matter in its most favorable light. "The trail points straight in that direction. With wood, water and cover, Dirty Pete'll be sure to stop there for the night, and if so, I can bag the rascal easy enough. If it was only for myself, blamed if I'd take another step to-night, but old Sabe—unless those horses are recovered, he won't be able to leave the Hills for a month, if even then."

It was hard work arguing against such weary and sore bones, but by dint of such reasoning, Roving Joe convinced himself that it was his duty to follow the trail at least as far as the timber-line, which looked like a pencil-line when seen from his elevated perch, cutting across the desert.

With a mental vow to make Peter Vanloo pay a high price for all this toil and trouble, Roving Joe stiffly descended from his perch and struck out along the trail once more. It was now nearly sunset, and the sky was thickening up with heavy clouds, so Joe knew that he would not have light for more than an hour more at the outside, and so he strained every nerve to cover as much distance along the trail before he would have to proceed wholly by guess.

The distance proved to be greater than he had calculated while on the rock point, and darkness came down upon him before he was much more than half-way to the timber. Settling on the general course of the trail, Roving Joe pressed on with dogged perseverance, though reason told him that it would be little less than a miracle should he strike upon the

traitor in the darkness for, almost as a matter of course, he would not keep a camp-fire burning long, should he even venture to light one at all under the circumstances.

"Find the rascal or not, it's the only thing to do now," he muttered, pegging away with a resolution that deserved a better reward. "Maybe there'll a streak of luck come my way, if I stick it out."

But the young trapper was doomed to disappointment. He reached the timber and found that, as he had felt sure would prove to be the case, it bordered a river—the Cheyenne, which they had crossed further down, when making for the Black Hills by the trail from Laramie.

Despite his fatigue and great need of sleep, Roving Joe skirted the timber for a considerable distance on either side of the point where he first struck it, vaguely hoping to catch a glimpse of the traitor's camp-fire, but without success.

"At last, thoroughly worn out and discouraged, the lad crawled into a patch of dead grass and fell asleep.

The sun was high up in the heavens when Roving Joe opened his eyes again, lying for some moments only half-awake, staring lazily around him, unable to comprehend his strange surroundings. But this did not last long. Like a revelation the memory of all that had occurred came back to him, and he scrambled to his feet with a little cry of dismay at having overslept himself.

It was not long before Roving Joe fully realized the fatal mistake he had made, for within less than one hundred yards from the bunch of dry grass in which he had slept, he found the spot where Peter Vanloo had spent at least a portion of the night! There was no sign of a camp-fire, but the hoof-marks and fresh droppings left by the stolen horses, could not be mistaken.

Words cannot do justice to the emotions of Roving Joe when he made this discovery. He was literally too full for utterance. Too intensely disgusted at himself for even a curse at his stupidity in over-sleeping, and thus losing the game he had trailed so far.

He could see where the traitor had crossed the river, and climbing up one of the tallest trees, he closely scanned the desert beyond as far as the human eye could reach, but all in vain. Peter Vanloo had made good use of the reprieve unconsciously afforded him, and was now many miles away.

For nearly an hour, Roving Joe hugged the slender top of the tree, trying to decide upon the proper course to pursue. That decision would have been easily arrived at, had his own interests alone been at stake; he would have taken the trail once more and never left it until the traitor was run to earth. But the remembrance of old Sabe, lying wounded and well-nigh helpless in that lone shack, exposed to danger from both wild beasts and wilder humans, forbade his acting on this savage instinct.

"The old man told me to pull out and not come back, and he meant just what he said, too; but I can't do it!" Roving Joe muttered, descending the tree. "It seems a monstrous

pity to let that scoundrel go free, but maybe we'll meet some day, and then he'll get his reward."

Only pausing to fill his canteen with fresh water, the youngster turned his back on the river and set out on his return to the Black Hills, eating a few bites from his scanty supply of food as he strode along.

The uneasiness which he felt concerning Sabe Sollars, urged him on at a rapid rate. Reason told him that he was turning his back on comparative safety to enter a trap from which the odds of escaping with life were heavily against him; but the lad was too proud to turn back.

"No matter what he said, Sabe 'd think I was scared out, if I don't go back."

That was the secret, put in simple words.

Roving Joe met with no adventure worthy special note, while making the best of his way back to the mountain shack, where he had so reluctantly left his wounded mate, but it was late in the afternoon of the next day before he reached the end of his toilsome journey.

His heart gave a mighty bound as he reached the point from whence the first glimpse of the little shack could be caught, for there it stood, seemingly the same as when he saw it last. With eager steps he advanced, but then paused abruptly when a few yards away, for he could catch the sound of human voices coming from the interior of the hut.

Swift as thought Roving Joe leaped behind the nearest cover, his weapons ready for use, for his first thought was that old Sabe had been taken by surprise and murdered, then an ambushade formed for his comrades should they return.

As he listened, Roving Joe felt sure he could distinguish the voice of Sabe Sollars, and then he divined the truth, though he used all caution in approaching the hut. He soon gained a position from whence he could look into the shack through a small crack, and, not a little to his relief, saw that old Sabe was the sole occupant.

His face was deeply flushed and he was talking rapidly, clearly in a raging fever from his wounds, though doubtless greatly aggravated by anxiety.

Roving Joe entered the shanty, and was almost instantly recognized by the wounded veteran, whose eyes grew dim with an emotion which he seldom suffered to show itself.

"I knowed you'd come back, laddy-buck," he muttered, as the young trapper bent over him. "I told you to go an' not come back ag'in, but it was all fer your own sake, not beca'se I raaly wanted you to take me at my word. I knowed you wouldn't run away an' leave the old man when he couldn't help hisself, though them durned liars said over an' over ag'in that you'd never show your face here ag'in when oncet you got outside. I knowed they was lyin', fer you hev come back, hain't ye, laddy-buck?"

"Of course—didn't I say I would, daddy?" said Roving Joe, soothingly, seeing that the old trapper was still wandering slightly in his mind. "We're mates in storm as well as sunshine, old fellow."

He said no more, for with a long sigh of intense relief that told how greatly he must have

suffered during those long, weary days, old Sabe turned over and fell into a sound, refreshing slumber.

Roving Joe felt more than repaid for all that he had endured when he saw what a blessed comfort his return had proved to the wounded man. Though worn and weary, he went out and made a thorough survey of the vicinity, satisfying himself that there were no enemies near at hand, nor could he find any recent traces of any prowlers.

"There's going to be a he-old storm to-night, or I miss my guess," he muttered, with an uneasy glance at the darkening heavens. "Well, let it come. Better that than the redskins, and they won't both be abroad at the same time."

Returning to the shack, Roving Joe cooked the first "square meal" he had enjoyed since he took up the trail of the traitor. By the time this was disposed of, the storm had fairly commenced, and then the young trapper was a witness of what the elements can do when they are in earnest. He no longer wondered at the traces of ruin which lay all around them. His sole marvel was that the hills themselves had been left standing.

The howling winds, the crashing thunder-peals, aroused old Sabe, and gave Roving Joe all he could do to keep the invalid quiet. There was one consolation, the young trapper was kept so busy that he had no time to feel frightened at the terrific storm.

The first fury of the tempest seemed to exhaust itself, and Sabe also quieted down, soon dropping into another sound sleep. Roving Joe was almost utterly worn out, and though he intended to remain on guard, at least until day should dawn, in a few minutes more he also fell asleep.

How long that slumber lasted, he never knew. A terrible crash awakened him and he leaped to his feet with a cry of alarm as he felt the ground perceptibly shake beneath him.

For a brief space he believed it was an earthquake, but then the heavy rolling of the thunder as it receded, undeceived him. The storm had returned with redoubled fury.

Fortunately the shack was in a well-sheltered spot, half-buried in the base of a hill, else it must have soon been blown away.

"Reckon there's nothing to do but grin and bear it," muttered Roving Joe, shrugging his shoulders as another terrific clap of thunder shook the earth. "If he only sleeps through it, I'll be thankful."

Curiously enough, the wounded trapper did not seem at all disturbed by the terrible tumult, but slept on as calmly and peacefully as any child in its mother's arms.

Poor fellow! that was fated to be his last sleep.

Frightened half out of his senses, Roving Joe was crouching in one corner, when there came another terrific crash, and then it seemed to him as though the entire mountain had fallen down upon them.

CHAPTER VI.

SAVED FROM FIRE—FOR WHAT?

FOR the first few moments after that tre-

mendous crash, Roving Joe was only conscious of a dull oppression and sense of suffocation. The heavy shock had in a great measure stupefied him, but that speedily wore away as the young trapper made his first attempt to arise. Sharp twinges of pain shot through every nerve and muscle, and he believed that he had received fatal injuries.

"Help, Sabe!" he cried, for the instant forgetting that the veteran was helpless to aid him, even if he had not been further injured by that terrible shock, whatever its nature.

As though in answer to his wild cry, there came a lull in the tempest. The stillness was almost stupefying in its contrast to that fierce tumult, and Roving Joe lay motionless. A curious paradox, but he seemed stunned by the silence.

Only for a moment. Then those stinging pains returned with what seemed redoubled intensity. Once more Roving Joe called on his mate for assistance, but without any response, save the distant rumbling of the storm as it gathered its forces anew.

All at once the terrible truth flashed upon the young trapper. The same fearful shock which had laid him low, had granted poor old Sabe Sollars a final reprieve from all earthly pain and sorrow.

With the cold sweat starting out all over him at this sickening fear, Roving Joe struggled to arise, and then for the first time realized that his inability to do so was not owing to his being crippled, but from the fact that he was held down by the timbers of the roof, which had fallen in upon him.

Howling, screaming and shrieking, like a myriad of wild beasts in deadly combat, the tempest returned to complete its work. Cold and cutting, Roving Joe could feel the wind almost raise him from the ground, twisting his head and shoulders back and forth, round and round, as though bent on tearing him to pieces, while peal on peal of thunder shook the very hills.

And then a cry of horror burst from the lips of the lad.

"My God! we'll be roasted alive!"

The darkness was lighted by a flash of ruddy light, as the whirling wind fanned the scattered embers from the fire where Roving Joe had cooked his supper, starting a dozen blazes in as many different spots!

A brief space of stupefaction in the face of the frightful death which threatened him, then Roving Joe made a desperate struggle for life, writhing and twisting, striving to free himself from the splintered timbers which held him to the ground; but in vain. One stick lay across his stomach, another diagonally over his loin and thigh, while his feet and right arm seemed covered with twisted timbers.

And in that whirling wind, the tongues of flame rose higher and higher, darting here and there, now shooting out until they almost licked the young trapper's face, now receding in time to allow him to catch his breath and renew his desperate, hopeless efforts to extricate himself from that death-trap.

It was terrible—horrible! To see the flames steadily gaining strength and power, to see

them crawling nearer and nearer, shooting out their serpent like tongues again and again, until fresh footholds were gained, to feel the increasing heat—and through it all, to feel that one was powerless to flee, or to even delay the frightful death.

Never while his life lasts will Roving Joe forget those few minutes—minutes as time is ordinarily computed, but countless ages as they seemed to him in that extremity.

Fortunately for the youngster, he had been occupying the corner of the shack furthest from the rude fire-place, and, as a matter of course, the fiercest of the flames were nearest that point. And yet, so rapidly were the flames spreading, thanks to the fanning wind, that Roving Joe felt he had little foundation for self-gratulation on that score. It would only be a slower death, instead of the more merciful one which had apparently overtaken poor old Sabe.

Of the next few minutes, Roving Joe could never give a clear account. He must have been driven half-crazy as he fought so vainly for life, seeing the fiery death drawing nearer and nearer, feeling the scorching flames as their arrowy tongues twined around his feet.

To all seeming, his fate was sealed beyond a doubt, when the flood-gates appeared to open wide, the torrents of rain and hail fell upon the blazing fire.

This much the young trapper realized, then his overtaken senses gave way, and everything was a blank.

Day had dawned and the sun was shining brightly when Roving Joe once more awoke to consciousness. An involuntary effort to arise brought back the memory of all that had occurred on that never-to-be-forgotten night. For a brief time he turned sick at heart and weak as a child, but then by a vigorous effort of will, he collected his energies of both body and mind scanning his surroundings closely, preparing to do all that mortal man could.

He saw that he could not either draw his right arm from under the timber which held it, nor lift it aside. Fortunately his left arm was at liberty, and securing the keen knife from his belt, he set to work to cut the stick in two, believing that with both his arms free, he could soon manage the rest.

It was hard and awkward work, but man can perform wonders when his life is at stake, and after a weary struggle, Roving Joe had both arms at liberty. But his work was only begun, and the worst was yet to come.

There is no necessity to follow him step by step; let it suffice that after an hour of steady labor, Roving Joe was able to assume a sitting posture, and then the work of freeing himself went on more rapidly. He no longer tried to cut through the timbers, but dug out the earth around his limbs, then dragged himself clear.

He crawled down to the creek and moistened his parched lips with the cool water. Never did a draught taste more delicious than that.

He bathed and rubbed his bruised and almost helpless limbs, fearful for a time that both of his legs were broken: but most providentially this dread proved unfounded.

No sooner was he able to stand up, than Rov-

ing Joe staggered back to the ruins of the little shack, heart-sick and trembling, for he knew only too well what he would find there.

The truth was even worse than he had dreaded. When a few of the shattered timbers had been dragged away, he saw in what manner the hut had been destroyed. A huge boulder had fallen from the hillside above the shack, crushing the stout timbers as though they had been straws, then striking fairly upon poor old Sabe as he lay heavily sleeping through that terrible storm.

It was a soul-sickening sight for one who loved the old trapper as well as did Roving Joe. There was scarce a trace of humanity left, save in the head and face. This portion of the body had been untouched, and as Roving Joe crouched above it, he burst into tears as he saw a peaceful smile resting on the haggard face; the same smile which had come into it when the veteran knew that his young comrade had not deserted him in his hour of need.

Words have not the power to tell how thankful that, since such an end must come, he had not yielded to the dictates of prudence, but had returned to his aged mate.

In his crippled state, Roving Joe was not able to remove the great mass of rock, and so, with eyes that could scarcely see for the blinding tears, he piled stones around the base of the boulder until the ghastly sight was hidden from view.

This melancholy duty performed to the best of his ability, Roving Joe, weak, trembling, totally unmanned by the terrible ordeal he had undergone, crawled away and crept into a clump of bushes, where he found a merciful oblivion in sleep, if sleep that heavy stupor could be called.

The night passed, and it was day again when he returned to consciousness. He was faint from lack of food, and it was well that such was the case, for it gave him something to do, and for a time kept him from brooding too deeply over the melancholy fate of his old friend.

Among the ruins of the shack, Roving Joe found the remnant of elk-meat which old Sabe had brought thither after his unfortunate fight with the three Sioux warriors. There was not much of it, and that little was scorched, smoke-scented, and filled with sand and dirt where it had been crushed beneath a falling beam when the shack was destroyed; but Roving Joe was thankful for even that.

It set him to thinking soberly. For the first time since that terrible blow, he looked his situation fairly in the face. Alone, on foot, in the heart of the Indian country, where there was never peace when the rival races came together, armed only with his revolvers, for both his own rifle and that of old Sabe had been broken beyond mending in the general smash-up, sorely bruised and well-nigh crippled—truly it was not an enviable situation.

"There's only one thing to do," he muttered, gloomily enough, after a full consideration of the position. "And that is to pull out while I can—before I get so stiffened up that I can't navigate at all."

Though he well knew that his only chance for

life lay in speedily leaving the Black Hills behind him, and reaching the nearest settlements before the red-skins struck his trail, it was no easy task for Roving Joe to tear himself away from the grave of his old mate. Just then it seemed as though that pile of rocks contained all that was dear to the lad.

Though Roving Joe could not be called either religious or sentimental, it is no shame to him to say that he dropped more than one tear and whispered more than one heart-felt prayer over the mangled remains of his old and tried friend before he could tear himself away. And more than once, when he reflected gloomily on what in all probability lay before him on that long and solitary journey, he felt strongly tempted to retrace his steps and await his fate beside the remains of his dead friend.

But as often there came the memory of the mother and other dear ones at home, and he dragged his sore and weary limbs onward.

How long it took him to reach the outer edge of the Black Hills, or why he had taken the trail leading to Buffalo Gap, instead of the route to Laramie, as he had at first intended, to this day Roving Joe is wholly ignorant. As in a dream he can remember climbing up the hillside to the point of rocks from which he had looked out over the desert in hopes of catching a glimpse of Peter Vanloo, can remember feeling a dull sense of disappointment when he saw that the plain was unbroken by aught human, but why he did this, or what followed thereafter, is still a mystery. No doubt the young trapper was out of his head, and in his delirium was living over the events of his trailing the traitor.

It was night when his consciousness returned, but even then, so strange and weird were his surroundings, that Roving Joe fancied himself still asleep, still dreaming.

CHAPTER VII.

"THE ONLY GOOD INDIAN IS A DEAD INDIAN."

SURELY these were but the wild phantasies of a disordered brain—nothing more substantial than the idle fabric of a dream? But if so, then that dream must be a first-class nightmare!

Above him were the dark boughs of forest trees, now receding, now starting out with renewed distinctness, seeming to wave their long arms in tune to the doleful sounds which came from—whence? There was a ruddy glow over all, as if shed by a camp-fire—ay! there were the dancing flames, leaping higher and higher, and—

Roving Joe strove to leap to his feet, to grasp a weapon, but in vain. He was powerless, like one under the influence of a baleful spell. He could move neither hand nor foot. He strove to cry out, but he could make no audible sound.

For a few moments this strange helplessness filled him with horror, but then that peculiar dreamy sensation came over him once more, and fancying that he was in a dream, sure enough, the young trapper watched the wild, weird doings with a dull, drowsy interest.

A peeled willow wand stood in the full glow of the fire, and from its top depended a human scalp, the skin stretched out tightly inside a little wooden hoop, to which it was attached by means of thongs of rawhide.

Around this pole and the fire itself, a number of nearly naked figures were circling slowly, keeping time to the movement with a low, monotonous chant in some unknown tongue.

Indians, celebrating their scalp-dance, thought Roving Joe, his mind going back to the time when he had been an interested witness of that weird ceremony for the first time. But that was all life and action. These fellows were bunglers. They seemed afraid to exert themselves. Perhaps all phantom red-skins were lazy and disinclined to violent exertion. Such were the thoughts that floated hazily through the dazed brain of the young trapper as he lay there watching.

But his unspoken criticism was somewhat premature. The savages, be they mere phantoms or substantial flesh and blood, were genuine artists, after their fashion. Beginning slowly and with deliberate movements, they gradually warmed to their work. At the start they joined hands, slowly circling around the scalp-bearing wand, chanting their song in a low, monotonous tone, as if half-asleep. But as the dance progressed, the warriors soon broke bolds, leaping higher and higher, circling more and more swiftly, no longer keeping the same step, but each one striving to out-do his comrades in wild contortions of body, limbs and face, to yell the loudest and introduce the most extravagant boasts of exploits performed, or of what would have been performed, had not the bad god frowned upon their hopes and doomed them to disappointment. They no longer kept to the same words, each one varying the song to suit his particular fancy, now and then breaking into loud whoops and yells, making fantastic gestures and brandishing weapons until they resembled nothing so much as a parcel of demons fresh loosed for a holiday.

Suddenly one of the band broke the circle and leaped close to the scalp-bearing wand. The others now resumed their monotonous chant, to give their leader a fair chance to make his boasts. This opportunity he made the most of, as Roving Joe divined, though it was all Greek to his ears. But it was a moment of intense interest to the young trapper, for with more clearness than his brain had been capable of before, he felt that this soloist was not a total stranger to him—that they had met before under very different circumstances—and then the whole truth flashed upon him.

It was no dream, but a terrible reality. Those were Indians of flesh and blood, and he was their prisoner, doubtless doomed to the torture. And that excited red-skin who was so loudly recapitulating his bloody exploits, was none other than the one whom he had saved from the vengeance of old Sabe Sollars, a few months before!

The strange spell which had held him until now was broken, and Roving Joe uttered a wild cry as he struggled to burst the bonds which he had not felt until now. That scream put an end to the rehearsal of the scalp-dance, for the time being, the Sphinx darting to where the young trapper lay, a ferocious grin upon his face, a malignant laugh breaking from his

These, and his insulting actions, killed the

faint hope which, almost unconsciously, sprung up in the heart of Roving Joe at this recognition on his part. Surely the Indian could not have forgotten him in that short space of time? He had saved his life, had attended him faithfully, despite the sneers and oft-repeated maxim of old Sabe Sollars that the only good Indian was a dead one. Roving Joe had doubted this in the days gone by, but now, when the Sphinx bent over him with taunting words and bitter mockery, he felt that the cynical old trapper had been right.

"You trapped now, white fool!" the savage cried with a ferocious laugh. "You saved my life and scalp then—I take yours now in pay!"

"And an infernal fool I was for my pains!" exclaimed the luckless young fellow, his eyes flashing with hot indignation as he glared up at that merciless visage.

"Just what the old white-head thought—just what Spotted Wolf *knew*," laughed the savage, turning to his fellows and uttering a few rapid words in the Sioux tongue.

They turned abruptly away and resumed their disgusting antics around the scalp-bearing wand.

It was just as well, perhaps that Roving Joe had been called upon to endure so much before this fresh calamity came upon him, for now his feelings seemed to be in a great measure deadened. He knew it was dread reality now, but somehow he did not feel much fear, only a vague regret that his hands were not at liberty for a few moments so that he could deal out the reward that ungrateful rascal so richly deserved.

Roving Joe remembers feeling a sleepy sort of wonder that he should take the matter so quietly, but he knew afterward that his brain was partly stupefied by all that he had been called upon to undergo during those last few days. He was rapidly improving, and the time was close at hand when he would feel it all acutely enough.

He soon grew tired of watching the mad gyrations of the savages, and to rest his weary eyes and aching brain, he turned his attention to the other surroundings.

He could distinguish a number of mustangs tethered near the spot, and as the fire flamed up more brightly, bringing the animals into clearer relief, Roving Joe uttered a little exclamation of wondering surprise, for among them, he saw one pony whose form seemed strangely familiar to him. Again and again he looked, then the startling truth burst upon him.

He was right—it was the mustang which he had ridden into the Black Hills, one of those stolen by Peter Vanloo during Roving Joe's vigil beside his wounded friend!

This surprise was all that was needed to fully awaken the dormant powers of the young trapper, and turning his head, he glanced at the still fresh scalp around which the red-skins were furiously gyrating. It shone red in the firelight, and Roving Joe needed no more to explain the mystery of the pony.

Peter Vanloo was safe enough from his vengeance now; but at the same time he would never again play the part of traitor!

With his returning strength of brain, Roving Joe felt a most natural longing for life, and as the sole hope remaining he resolved to make an appeal to the Sphinx, or Yellow Wolf, as that worthy styled himself, recalling the great service he had rendered him, reminding him of the voluntary promise he had given of one day proving his gratitude. It was truly a forlorn hope, after the actions of the rascal a few minutes before, but life is very sweet to the young, and at the worst Roving Joe knew that he could only be refused.

With this resolve, Roving Joe watched the red-skins in their rehearsal, for such it really was. A more consummate actor than the Indian of to-day never trod the boards. His speeches, his songs, every action which he indulges in before the public, all are carefully rehearsed beforehand, until he is letter-perfect. Particularly is this the case with his scalp-dances. He will delay his return home for the purpose of arranging his programme on such occasions, will have each boast, each yell and action firmly fixed in his memory, and when he seems to all spectators carried away to frenzy by the excitement of the moment, then he is acting the most carefully. No matter how wild his antics, how frantic his dance and thrilling his picture of the fight and victory, it is all acting.

At length the rehearsal came to an end, and as Roving Joe caught the eye of Yellow Wolf, he called to him. Promptly enough the Indian responded, but before the young trapper could speak, the still raw scalp was slapped violently into his face, with an insulting epithet.

"Smell of your mate, white dog; that's all there is left of him!" he cried, with a ferocious laugh. "I killed him, I tore off his scalp, just as I have taken the scalps of a hundred more of your accursed race—just as I will tear off yours, when you are at the last gasp after the torture!"

Roving Joe shuddered and closed his eyes, his heart filled with intense loathing and despair. It was bitter enough for him to have to beg for mercy at the hands of one so lost to all manly sentiments, but life is very sweet, and for it man will do much. So, smothering his feelings as much as was possible, he said:

"Did I treat you like this when I had you in my power, helpless and crippled? No; I saved your life, even when it seemed as though I would have to shoot my best friend to hinder him from killing you. I nursed you back to health. I gave you your weapons, gave you food to keep you from starving on the long trail, and you swore that you was very grateful, that you would gladly repay my kindness when you had a chance."

"Yellow Wolf never lies," retorted the savage, with a mocking laugh. "He will keep his word. You are too good, too kind for this world. The happy hunting-grounds is the best place for such as you. There you can feed your enemies on bear-meat and honey, and no one will call you a simple fool for your pains."

"You mean to kill me, then?"

"To help, yes," was the prompt response. "The whole tribe will play a part in the ceremony, of course. When you had Yellow Wolf

there, crippled by your bear-trap, you could never ask questions enough about the habits and customs of my people, and when the Indian scorned to answer you, you repeated them to old white-head. Now you will learn more than ever he could tell you."

Turning to his fellow-savages, only one or two of whom appeared to have but the slightest knowledge of the English language, which he spoke so fluently, Yellow Wolf uttered a few rapid words in the Sioux tongue, which seemed to please them immensely, judging from their eager gestures and the manner in which they crowded around him and the young trapper.

"You were very good to talk so much to the poor Indian, though Yellow Wolf was too proud to answer when he was a prisoner; but he has not forgotten. Now he will talk, and you can listen. And when Yellow Wolf is through, you will know more about the Brule Sioux than old white-head could tell you in a lifetime."

The savage rascal paused for a moment, making a gesture to his comrades, as though inviting their close attention, and while his lips addressed Roving Joe, his no-less nimble fingers interpreted what he said in the strange tongue, for the benefit of his fellows.

"You see this scalp—it was torn from the head of a white thief, one whom you must know, for he had with him the ponies Yellow Wolf saw at your camp when he was a captive."

"You say right—he was a thief," cried Roving Joe, for the moment forgetting himself as he recalled the foul treachery of Peter Vanloo, but for which poor old Sabe Sollars might be still living, and them both in safety. "We thought him a friend and trusted him, just as I trusted you, but he also was a dirty scoundrel—"

The words found utterance before Roving Joe thought, but Yellow Wolf only laughed as the young trapper stopped short, and seemed to frankly interpret the speech to his mates. They also laughed, and seemed to enjoy the reflection.

"Then we are even, white fool," said the Indian, with a mocking grin. "I killed your enemy. That is life for life."

"We found him, and stole upon him to take him alive, but he did not sleep so sound as you, and I had to shoot him dead. Lucky for him that it was so; lucky for you that we had taken a scalp before we found you, else you would never have learned anything more about the traits of the Brule Sioux."

"I killed the fire-head. We took his horses, and with them more gold-dust than a stout man could raise to his back. You say right when you call him a thief. He stole that gold. It was taken from these mountains, and they all belong to the Sioux—them and all that they contain."

"Yellow Wolf never forgets anything, and when he looked at the ponies, he remembered seeing them before. They were the same he would have stolen from you when you turned him away from your lodge in the ground, only the white-head kept too close a watch over them. But when he knew the ponies, he swore he would make that all even. He knew that

you and old white-head must still be alive and in the land of the Sioux, for the fire-head carried none of your weapons, and there was no other white trail near his camp.

"Yellow Wolf promised his warriors more scalps, and led them along the back-trail of fire-head. He came this far, and he saw little white fool sleeping up on the rocks like a grizzly bear cub. He took him captive, for a big chief scorns to take the scalp of a pappoose, when he has the hair of a man to show. Instead, he saves him to amuse the squaws with.

"Do you ask how? Has fear stolen away your tongue? Once you would have asked a hundred questions before this. You did ask them, when it was Yellow Wolf who was the prisoner. Now he will answer them for you.

"You will go to the village of the Brule Sioux with your red friends. You will be so glad to see your poor brothers that you will take off all of your clothes, and give them away. Then, lest you grow cold when night comes, the kind red-skins will build a fire for you. Not a big fire such as the foolish white-faces kindle, but a nice little Indian fire, just enough to keep you warm and comfortable.

"We will lay you flat on your back, and for fear you might walk in your sleep and hurt yourself, we will tie you fast to stakes planted in the ground, one for each hand and foot. Then we will start the fires, all around you, with a very nice little one in the middle of your breast. You will hold very still, so the poor Indians can warm their hands by your fire, and when they jump and laugh with joy at the kindness of the mighty white warrior, you will join them and laugh too."

All through this mocking harangue, the savage was acting the horrible scene out to the very life, while the other red-skins laughed and applauded him most heartily.

Roving Joe turned sick and faint as the malignant wretch went on, for he felt that his last faint hope was forever destroyed, that his fate was sealed beyond all peradventure.

He did not hear the end of this frightful description, for the voice of Yellow Wolf seemed to recede, the figures of the Indians grew indistinct and shadowy, then faded away altogether. A merciful oblivion had been granted the luckless young trapper. He had lost his consciousness.

For a time at least, he was safe from further torture.

CHAPTER VIII.

LESS BLACK THAN PAINTED.

"HIST! Not a sound, not a word above your breath, or all is lost!"

Such were the softly whispered words that aroused Roving Joe from the dull, heavy stupor into which he had fallen, when it seemed to him that his last chance for life had vanished.

Half-doubting the evidence of his ears, half-convinced that the words had birth only in a distempered fancy, the young trapper partly raised his head and looked around him.

He had been left alone by the savages, when they saw that he was no longer conscious of their tortures. He could see them gathered

around the little camp-fire, smoking and talking, laughing and jesting in a manner very different from that of cold stoicism, which they are wont to assume when in the presence of white men, and which so many of our border writers seem to think is habitual with the race.

Roving Joe could see nothing of Yellow Wolf, but he did not lament this fact. What little faith he had felt in the Indian race was now dead enough, after the malignancy of the savage whose life he had saved at the risk of his own.

"Be careful," softly breathed the mysterious voice, now coming from the little clump of bushes near which Roving Joe was lying. "Control yourself, as you value your life. If the Indians suspect what is going on, they will kill us both."

Roving Joe had to bite his lips until the blood came, to keep back the glad cry which arose to them as he began to realize that some trusty friend was at work for his benefit. But who could it be? One minute before, it did not seem that he had a single friend left on earth, much less one able and willing to risk a life to save him from the threatened torture.

Before his thoughts could run further, the voice sounded once more.

"You thought me a lying, treacherous dog, but there was no other course by which you could be saved. Yellow Wolf has not forgotten. He is grateful. He swore by the good god, that if ever the time came, he would repay the heavy debt you put upon his heart. That time has come now. Say you will trust him and act just as he advises. If so, he will save you or lay down his life at your feet."

The gentle voice ceased speaking, but Roving Joe was speechless. From the highest pinnacle of hope, he was cast into the blackest depths of despair. Instead of a friend, it was his deadliest enemy, mocking him with hopes that would never be realized, trying a still more diabolical scheme of torment, no doubt laughing in his sleeve as he lay there like a snake in ambush.

"You still doubt Yellow Wolf," breathed the voice, and Roving Joe fancied there was regret in the gentle tones, though he believed this was caused by chagrin that his diabolical plan seemed about to prove a failure. "It is not strange that you should do so. But think it all over. Yellow Wolf is only one; they are many. Were he to talk of letting the pale-face go free, the Brule Sioux would quickly remember that the hated blood of the white man flows in the veins of Yellow Wolf, and they would take his scalp with that of his young white brother. There was only one way, and so Yellow Wolf threw dust in their eyes, and said that the pale-face should die the long fire-death. To fool them, he mocked at his brother, though each word he uttered cut his own heart like a knife."

The voice ceased as one of the Sioux arose from the circle and came forward. The Indian stooped over Roving Joe and tested his bonds, but the young trapper kept his eyes closed, and the savage returned to the fire, satisfied that all was right in that quarter.

During that brief period, Roving Joe did a vast amount of thinking. Despite all that had gone before, he was affected by the earnest

words of Yellow Wolf, though he could not yet bring himself to believe that the Indian was really his friend. But there was a faint chance that it might be true, and like the drowning man, he caught at a straw.

"Prove your words by setting me free, then," he said, in the same guarded tones used by the red-skin.

"Yellow Wolf will, if his white brother will play the part he asks him," was the prompt response. "Listen well, for with every moment here both our lives are in danger.

"Yellow Wolf will steal away as he came, and none of his warriors will know that he has spoken to the pale-face. He will tell them that he has been out in the night consulting his medicine. That it tells him there are more scalps in store for the Brule Sioux, if they are bold and act promptly. They will open their ears, for they know that Yellow Wolf is a candidate for the now vacant office of medicine-chief, and when he tells them that he will test his new medicine, they will be ready enough.

"Yellow Wolf will come here with them, and his white brother will seem terrified by what he sees and hears. When Yellow Wolf asks him where the rest of his party is, let him speak as though the words were forced from his lips against his will. Say that they are a long sun's ride away, and that they are as many as the fingers on both hands. Then Yellow Wolf will do the rest."

The voice ceased speaking, and while Roving Joe, still half-dazed, and by no means certain that all this was not the weird phantasies of a disordered brain, while he was listening for further speech which would either confirm his waking hopes or else banish them forever, he saw Yellow Wolf approaching the camp-fire from a point directly opposite from that which the hidden voice had occupied.

Roving Joe made no further effort to unravel the enigma, but lay listlessly watching the red-skins, to whom Yellow Wolf was talking in swift, earnest tones. And then, with excited exclamations, the entire party passed over to, where the young trapper was lying. Then, in the dim, uncertain shadows, a strange scene took place.

His every motion eagerly watched by the interested Indians, Yellow Wolf went through a variety of signs and motions, touching the person of Roving Joe in different portions with the beaded pouch which contained the new "medicine" he had made for the occasion. Then he spoke:

"Son of a white dog, answer! How long is the trail you left behind you? How far away are your fellow-thieves, and how many scalps do they number among them?"

Roving Joe fancied that he could detect a look of almost painful anxiety on the face of the speaker, even through the thick layers of paint which disguised his natural expression, but he did not make the reply as he had been instructed. The old doubts and suspicion returned with redoubled force. He felt that Yellow Wolf was seeking to make capital for himself, and at the same time enjoy raising hopes only to dash them to the earth again as soon as his purpose was won.

Yellow Wolf must have read this in the face of the lad, for as he resumed his weird movements about the captive, he broke into a low, monotonous song, the notes of which were letters, spelling the words:

"You still doubt. By the good god I swear that I am true. Play the part I told you, else you are doomed. In no other way can I hope to save you."

He ceased, fumbling over his medicine-bag, his eyes fixed upon the young trapper with an earnest, appealing gaze. Thus headroitly gave Roving Joe time to weigh his words well, and the desired result was gained.

For his actions on that night, so contradictory and whimsical, the young trapper has never been able to account satisfactorily, save on the supposition that he was for the time out of his head.

Be that as it may, he now assumed an expression of supplicating terror so natural that a low mutter of eager interest ran through that savage throng. They believed that the new medicine of Yellow Wolf was beginning to produce the exact effect he had predicted.

Bending low and tapping the prisoner in the face with the beaded pouch, Yellow Wolf said:

"Son of a white dog, answer. Where are your friends?"

"Follow my trail and you will find them."

"How many scalps do they number?"

"Count your fingers once over," muttered Roving Joe, speaking like one in a dream, unable to say more than the Indian had told him.

But that was enough. Yellow Wolf seemed afraid to question him further, for he must have seen that the poor fellow was hardly conscious of what he was saying.

A loud, exultant yell burst from his lips as he turned to interpret the confession to his comrades. They had understood nearly all that was said, and so his task was easier.

"Warriors! Sons of the Brule Sioux!" he cried, moving toward the camp-fire. "The mighty medicine of Yellow Wolf has unchained the tongue of the pale-face, and made it follow the straight trail of truth. There are others of his hated race in the lands of the Sioux. We will steal upon them, and drink their blood. We will take their scalps, and have the long dance when we return to the lodges of our tribe."

Wild yells answered him, and the majority of the savages began dancing and leaping wildly about the camp-fire as if in anticipation of the mad orgies with which their victory over the hated pale-faces should be celebrated when they returned in triumph to their village. But there was one cooler head among them; a tall, middle-aged warrior, who had secret aspirations for the now vacant position of medicine-man.

"Perhaps the medicine is evil, and made the pale-face dog speak crooked. There may be no white-faces at the other end of the trail, or else there may be so many that we cannot reach their scalps—"

"When did a true warrior of the Sioux ever pause to count the number of his enemies when there were white scalps crying for them to claim the reward of men?" cried Yellow Wolf,

hotly, his words being greeted by a wild yell of approval from the others, with whom, it was clear, the objector was no great favorite.

"Bear-in-a-tree is no coward," sharply retorted the Indian, his little eyes glittering venomously. "He can count white scalps with Yellow Wolf, and still have enough left over to make a robe for his favorite squaw."

"Because he went on the war-path when Yellow Wolf was but a pappoose. How many scalps has he taken since he left the Sioux lodges the last time? Yellow Wolf has one. He wants others to keep that one from feeling lonely. His medicine has told him where they may be found, and he is going after them. Bear-in-the-tree need not go. He can run back to the village and tell the squaws to make ready for the long dance. And when Yellow Wolf and his braves are through, then Bear-in-the-tree can enter the circle, and sing the mighty deeds he would have performed, had not the bad god put a cloud over his eyes and fear into his heart."

For a brief space it seemed as though there would be a fight, for the less supple tongue of Bear-in-the-tree was unable to fitly answer the swift, mocking speech of Yellow Wolf, but mutual friends interposed, and the storm blew over.

"The medicine of Yellow Wolf is good, but it forgot to tell us one thing," said a wrinkled old warrior. "The pale-faces shoot long and hard, and if we take the white dog with us, he may escape. Does not the new medicine of Yellow Wolf bid us take his scalp now?"

"No," swiftly rejoined the other. "Yellow Wolf has sworn that his squaw shall lead the torture of the white dog. He shall live until we go back to our town. He can stay here until we return from taking the scalps of his fellow-dogs, or one warrior can take him back to the village—"

There was a general murmur of dissent at this suggestion, but Yellow Wolf was determined to carry his point.

"Yellow Wolf is not a hog. He has one scalp now. Listen, brothers. We will play with the bones to decide who shall guard the white dog to the village. The loser shall go, but to make his heart less heavy, he shall claim the scalp of the pale-face when the squaws have tortured him enough."

This truly generous offer was the winning stroke, and as all plains Indians are natural-born gamblers, the game was soon under way. It lasted for nearly an hour, when fate—or dexterous manipulation, rather—settled the question. Yellow Wolf was the elected one.

He made no protest, though his countenance was gloomy enough. Bear-in-the-tree was correspondingly elated, for he had been the last one to defeat the medicine-man, but Yellow Wolf heaped ashes on his head by transferring the command of the party to him.

With the first gleam of light the Indians took up the trail, while Yellow Wolf was binding Roving Joe upon one of the horses captured when Peter Vanloo was slain.

Still doubting, Roving Joe kept silence while this was being done, nor was a word spoken by either until the camping-ground of the past

night was left far behind them. Then Yellow Wolf broke the painful silence.

"Was Yellow Wolf the dog you thought him, brother?"

Roving Joe made no response in words, but looked significantly at the stout thongs with which his hands were still fastened. The Indian bent over and severed them with his knife, then held out a belt with its scabbards all filled.

The young trapper saw that they were the same weapons that had been taken from him when he was captured, and grasped them eagerly. Yellow Wolf smiled, then added:

"If Yellow Wolf had acted differently while the eyes of the Sioux warriors were upon him, there would have been two scalps lost. But each black word that he forced himself to utter, cut deeper into the red heart than in yours. He could not have spoken them at all, only he knew that the cloud would be blown away ere long, and his white brother learn to know him as he really was."

"Then I am free? You don't mean to take me to your village for the torture, as you threatened?"

"Would Yellow Wolf set your hands at liberty and put loaded weapons in them, if he meant to play the traitor?" the Indian asked, laughingly. "No—you are free now. Take this rifle; it is better than the one you lost. Here is food enough to last you until you can find more. The horse you ride is yours. In a few moments more we will strike the trail that will lead you to your people. Stay with them. Don't come back. The next time Yellow Wolf may not be able to save your scalp."

Roving Joe tried to express his gratitude, but was checked by the uplifted hand of the strange red skin.

"Life for life—scalp for scalp; that is the religion of my people."

"But you are not an Indian—"

"No matter what I once may have been, I am all Indian now," was the swift interruption. "See—here our trails divide. Ride fast and do not linger on the way. Bear my words in mind; never return here. The world is large enough to hold you on the outside of the Black Hills."

"But you—how will you account for my escape?" asked Roving Joe, for the first time thinking how dearly this generous action might cost his preserver. "And about the scalps they went after? Won't you get into trouble about that?"

"My medicine was bad," said Yellow Wolf, with a cunning twinkle in his eyes. "Good-by. Remember that even an Indian can be grateful."

Wheeling his horse, he dashed swiftly away, before Roving Joe could say another word. And from that day to this, they have never met again, though the young trapper has often wondered what wonderful tale he told to clear himself.

CHAPTER IX.

ROVING JOE HAS "A GOOD TIME."

ROVING JOE cut little time to waste after the

brief leave-taking of Yellow Wolf, for he knew that his scalp could not be considered wholly his own on that side of Laramie.

His first impulse was to place the river behind him, then a very few moments convinced him that his proper course lay down-stream, as in that direction lay their buried furs. Until that very minute, Roving Joe had forgotten all about these articles, but it must be something very serious that can banish the memory of money for any length of time from the average white man, and the young trapper remembered that the *cached* furs were quite valuable, that he was far from home, and that it would be a tedious journey without a little of the "filthy lucre" to smooth the trail before him.

Not to dwell too long on this part of the story, Roving Joe not only found the *cache* undisturbed, but loading the bales of furs upon his horse, himself making the rest of the journey on foot, he reached Laramie in safety.

Roving Joe was all excitement when he entered the place, and lost no time in telling his story to those in authority, but not a little to his mingled surprise and indignation, he found that his story was disbelieved.

"The old man may be dead—no doubt he is, since you come in without him," said one, coldly. "But the rest of that yarn is too thin. All the gold there is in the Hills is wrapped up in fur, as you seem to have discovered. If you are wise, you'll sell out and pull up stakes, before the friends of old Sabe conclude to question you too closely on that point."

Such, in brief, was the reception given the story told by Roving Joe, but he was not in a condition to resent the foul insinuation just then. His bodily powers gave way, and feeling that he was going to be sick, he made a confidant of one of the trappers whom he had met before, intrusting him with the sale of the furs and care of him while ill; if he died, the man was to take the money for his trouble.

Roving Joe was sick for a week, and for part of that time, his nurse doubted whether he would ever arise from his bed; but youth and a powerful constitution at length won the battle, and Roving Joe was afoot once more. He found that his trapper-friend had been a faithful steward, selling the furs for considerably more than the young trapper expected, and he further proved his friendship by adding the warning:

"You'd best pull out fer cooler quarters jist as soon as you kin straddle your critter, boy. Old Sabe had a heap o' fri'nds in these parts, an' some o' them hes talked about lendin' you a trail-rope ontel you 'fess the rights o' his goin' under."

"But you don't believe—" faltered the poor fellow, only to be interrupted by the trapper:

"Course not; I won't b'lieve anythin' you don't want me to; nur I won't give you away, nuther. I only wish it'd bin this chicken instead o' you as hed the same chaine at the old 'roon. I owed him a grudge, anyway, an' that's why I looked a'ter you while you was looney—so none o' his mates would git at the truth o' the matter. But you kep' a cluss mouth—never a word o' how you got away with him."

Heart-sick and discouraged, Roving Joe turned away. This man was the only one who

had seemed to care whether he lived or died, yet even he deemed the young trapper guilty of murder most foul. Only for that belief, he would not have taken the trouble to nurse him back to life. There was no means of proving his innocence, and when the shades of night settled over the post, Roving Joe was riding rapidly away, sick at heart and wholly disgusted with his fellow-creatures.

Two days later found him in Cheyenne, at that time a very lively town, with more fun to the square inch than even the generality of border towns could boast—which was needless.

Almost the first person whom he saw on entering the place was Harry Cornell, with whom he had spent his first winter trapping on the head-waters of the Republican, and of whom mention has been made in a former volume.

The meeting was a glad one, on both sides, and as Harry was already a "little under the weather"—in other words, had been drinking—while Roving Joe was just miserable for thinking of the sad fate which had befallen his old friend, together with the unjust suspicion which had fallen upon himself, it was no difficult task for the rollicking young cowboy to overcome the promise which Roving Joe had made his mother of never tasting intoxicating liquor, and half an hour later the young trapper "was on it, bigger'n a wolf."

The bad whisky drove Roving Joe nearly wild, and when Harry realized his mistake, and tried to take Joe where he could sleep off the effects of the liquor, he was repulsed.

"Sabe said we'd have a he old jamboree when we struck the settlements once more, and as he is gone, I've got to celebrate for us both," argued Joe, winding up with a wild whoop that drew all eyes toward them.

Harry persisted, but Roving Joe was now entirely beyond his control, and as the cowboy tried to force the young rascal along, a swift blow knocked him half-way across the saloon.

It was very fortunate for Roving Joe that Harry had himself under better control, else he might have fared but ill, for he was in no condition to take care of himself, though willing enough to make the attempt, brandishing his revolver and calling on Cornell to defend himself. Instead, Harry beat a retreat, preferring to rest for the time under the imputation of being a coward rather than do harm to one whom he liked, and who was now maddened by liquor mainly through his persuasions.

Elated by what he then considered a triumph, Roving Joe called all hands up to have a drink with him, and when this ceremony was fittingly performed, during which the young rascal had exhibited a well-filled buckskin sack, he found that he possessed any number of very attentive friends in the room of the one whom he had driven away.

Two of these, however, asserted their rights, and ere long they were initiating Roving Joe into the mysteries of "draw-poker," of which he knew the simplest rules, and nothing more.

Of course there could be but one result, for the youngster was in no condition to detect their scheme, had it been played far less skillfully than was the case. He had a hazy idea that it would not do for him to drink any more,

while playing with strangers, and he refused all liquor; but the end would have been the same, had none others interfered.

Roving Joe had just received a good hand, and in hopes of winning back some of his losses was putting up a considerable stake, when a white hand, with long, slender fingers, was placed upon the money, pushing it back to his side of the table, while a gentle voice uttered:

"Sorry to spoil sport, gents, but I reckon this game has run long enough."

At the first interruption, the two gamblers looked up with angry exclamations, grasping their revolvers, but the instant they recognized the speaker, they turned pale as death, all their bravado gone like magic.

Roving Joe was more astonished than angry at first, and took a square look at the stranger, before saying anything.

He saw a man, something over six feet in height, with broad, square shoulders, well-formed chest and sinewy limbs, and a face that was strikingly handsome. Keen, steady-gazing eyes of a clear blue; a well-cut nose, a little inclined to be aquiline; lips red and soft as those of a woman, only partially hidden by a silken mustache which hung below his chin. It, as well as his hair, which fell carelessly over his powerfully formed shoulders in uncut ringlets, was of a soft yellow hue, fine and well-cared for as though worn by a woman. On his head he wore a sombrero with broad, stiff brim; a ruffled and embroidered shirt of immaculate whiteness; coat and trousers of beautifully embroidered and beaded buckskin; top-boots of patent leather; while the belt around his small, round waist, contained a brace of ivory-handled revolvers and knife.

In one word, the beau ideal of a frontier sport and dandy; but one whose name even then was a power along the border, though Roving Joe had not much more than heard it then, and had not the faintest idea of who the stranger was who seemed to take such an interest in his affairs.

"We don't interfere with your game, Bill," one of the cowed gamblers muttered, shrinking away, but still reluctant to abandon their prize.

"So much the better for you," was the cool response. "I make this my game, now. You are wanted outside, I reckon. We'll excuse you, gents. I have a few words to say in private with this young man—"

"Keep your seats," cried Roving Joe, sharply as the two crestfallen gamblers made a move to arise. "You can't jump the game while you're winner—"

"Well put in," said the stranger, with a low laugh. "Fork over, gents. Two against one isn't fair play, anyhow. Come, don't make me insist, or somebody'll get hurt. Down with the dust—and in a hurry, too."

The gamblers evidently knew him better than Roving Joe did, and chose the least disagreeable horn of the dilemma, disgorging their winnings with the best grace they could summon.

"Is that the correct amount, sir?" asked Bill, turning to Joe, adding in mock apology to the gamblers: "Of course I am quite sure you would not hold anything back from one of my

friends, but I ask the question lest you should be robbing yourselves, and giving too much."

"Who asked you to interfere, anyway?" demanded Roving Joe, fancying that his manhood and power to take care of himself was being called into question. "'Pears to me you've got a powerful lip of your own. I'm no friend of yours. I never saw you before, and I don't care if I never see you again."

"It's my friend, Joe," said Harry Cornell, hastily, coming forward as though fearful of the consequences which might follow this rude speech.

But his fears were unfounded. The border dandy only smiled, as he made reply:

"I'll apologize whenever you ask me, but I don't like to look on and see a white man skinned by professional card-sharps like those fellows. Harry, here, asked me to speak a word to them, and to oblige him, I did so. Is that enough?"

"I'm not a baby," growled the youngster, surlily. "Guess I'm able to take care of myself without your put in—"

"Let me introduce you—this is Wild Bill, Joe—"

"All right—glad to see you, Mister Bill," and already forgetting the imaginary offense, Roving Joe grasped the hand of the celebrated scout and fighter. "Hellow, you red-headed beer-jerker! send some p'izen this way!"

With the quiet good-humor for which he was so noted, Wild Bill seated himself at the little table, and the three were soon drinking together like friends of a lifetime.

"You gave me a devil of a lick, boy-Joe," said Harry, rubbing his enlarged and discolored proboscis ruefully. "But I knew I was to blame, for getting you to drink, and so I ran away to get out of thrashing you or getting thrashed myself. As soon as I got a little cooled off, I came back, and saw that those sharks had got hold of you. I knew they were mighty bad medicine when they once fairly tasted their game, and that there would be powder burned if I cut in on my own hook, so I struck out for Wild Bill, knowing that one word from him would do more than a pound of lead from any common man."

"And I was ready enough to put a finger in the pie, as soon as I knew who the fellows were who were engineering the job," said Wild Bill, ignoring the rather fulsome compliment. "If you must flip the pasteboards, young fellow, tackle some one nearer your size; you don't stand any show with professional blacklegs like those sharps."

The liquor he had drank rendered Roving Joe unusually touchy, and he promptly took offense at this little speech, looking upon it as a sort of slur not to be meekly received by a man of spirit.

"You talk as though you knew it all, and I was a baby or a fool. Now I'm a man who stands ready to back up all I say or do, and I just think I can knock the hind-sights off of you at any game of cards you care to name. Put up or shut up!"

Those red lips tightened a trifle, and the warm flush on the smooth-shaven cheeks died out at this rude speech, but once more Harry Cornell interfered on behalf of his friend,

"Wait a bit, Joe; then we'll talk it over. Bill, there's something I forgot; please step this way for a moment."

Without a word the borderman complied, and drawing a little aside, the cowboy talked earnestly for several minutes. Roving Joe watched them suspiciously for a time, then, as the liquor which he had swallowed made its devilish influence felt more and more, he began singing in a loud tone, attracting no little attention from the crowd of gamblers and others.

The angry looks and ugly threats sent toward the young rascal by those whose game he was disturbing, seemed to have more influence with Wild Bill than all the arguments used by the cowboy, and returning to the table, he said:

"I don't want to stir you up again, young fellow, but I tell you frankly that you are in no condition to play cards for money. It would be robbing you—"

"If you're afraid to tackle me, say so, flat-footed, and I'll hunt up a pardner with more sand," cried the youngster.

"You are resolved to play, then?"

"Either you or somebody—anybody—with sand in 'em!"

CHAPTER X.

A PRIVATE GAME OF "DRAW."

THOSE keen blue eyes gazed steadily into the flushed and heated face of the young trapper for a brief space, and Roving Joe fancied he could detect a faint cynical smile playing around those woman-lips; but if so, it quickly vanished.

"All right! If you're bent on gambling, I reckon I might as well take your money as any one else. Shall we play here?"

"Here—there—anywhere—it's all the same to this beaver!" cried Roving Joe, growing more and more noisy and reckless as the fumes of the fiery poison mounted to his brain. "Whoop-ee-e! I'm a wolf, stuffed with fireworks! Touch me with a match an' set me to goin'. Whoop-ee-e! Hi-yah!"

With another wild yell, the drink-crazed lad leaped upon the table and began a tipsy waltz, yelling and slinging his challenges broadcast over the room. The different card-games were broken up, and as the angry or malicious gamblers surrounded the table, it would have fared ill with Roving Joe, only for Wild Bill.

Joe was no infant then, in either size or weight, but Wild Bill handled him like one, jerking him down from the table and holding him harmless with one hand, while he turned toward the crowd, revolver in hand, saying sharply:

"There's no help needed, gentlemen. This is my mate, a trifle off, just now, but I can manage him. Fall back, if you please, unless you want to take a hand in the game, with Wild Bill as dealer."

Apparently, none cared to interfere on those terms, and between them, Wild Bill and Harry Cornell contrived to withdraw Roving Joe from the gambling-bell.

The first effect of the cool night air was to make Roving Joe sick and dizzy, so that his friends had but little difficulty in leading him to a building some distance away, where

Bill left them, after a few whispered words with the cowboy.

Harry unlocked the door and helped his friend inside. Striking a light, a rather neatly furnished room was revealed, a small round table in the center being well provided with cards, liquor and cigars. At the further end of the room was a cushioned lounge, where Harry tried to induce Joe to lie down, but without success, the liquor making him as stubborn as a mule, and just about as easy to reason with.

"Ain't goin' to bed—goin' to make a night of it," he hiccupped. "Where's that dandy card-sharp? Took water, by thunder!"

"You don't want to play to-night, Joe," said Harry, meaning well enough, but setting awkwardly to work.

"Must do it! Old Sabe said celebrate, an' I've got to do it for both. Whar's he gone to? Open the door, an' let me—"

"You won't lay down an' have a good sleep?"

"Sleep nothin'! Harry, you're a p'izen good feller, but you're a durned fool! You want another lickin'. Stan' up an' be knocked down like a man—"

As Harry afterward admitted, he was strongly tempted to act upon this suggestion, with the parts reversed, but then he knew that he was not entirely free from blame, and he resolved to try more pacific measures, and let Roving Joe have his own way for the time being.

"Will you stay quietly in here, if I run out and bring Wild Bill back to play with you?" he asked, a little doubtfully. "You won't run away—"

"Nary run—not from an army o' sech!" declared Roving Joe, with a vague sense that his running would be an utter failure, under the circumstances. "Jest fetch the dandy card-sharp to the fore. Ef I don't teach him a thing or two 'bout poker, then I'm drunk—that's all!"

"And the man who says that you're drunk, has got to climb all over me!" exclaimed Harry, with well-assumed indignation. "I'm goin' now. If you get dry before I come back with Wild Bill, help yourself," and he motioned toward the liquor on the table.

But the hint was thrown away. Though bound to "celebrate," Roving Joe felt not the slightest inclination to indulge in any more liquid lightning. To be perfectly plain, he had a constant struggle to keep down that which he had already put himself outside of. It seemed almost as though he had swallowed half-a-dozen cats, and that they were all playing hide-and-go-seek in their new quarters.

After a lapse of a few minutes, Harry Cornell returned, accompanied by Wild Bill and a tall, dark fellow who was introduced to Roving Joe as Tom Brady.

"Just enough to have an interesting little game," said Wild Bill, in his cheery tones, going over to the table and pouring out drinks all around. "Take a taste, gents, before we settle down to business."

The others complied, but Roving Joe refused. He had a dim remembrance of having been warned against the wiles of gamblers, and mixed his present companions up with the blacklegs from whom they had rescued him.

"You don't join us, young man?" asked Wild Bill.

"G'inst my principles," shortly uttered Joe, with a knowing look on his flushed face. "I'm a temprunce man. Never indulge—specially when there's business on hand."

It may well be doubted whether Wild Bill, before or afterward, ever listened to a speech in which suspicion of foul play was as plainly hinted, without wiping out the insult in blood, but now he only laughed lightly, and took up the cards.

"Every one to their own taste. Now I can't enjoy a little game without a taste of whisky. It seems to keep up the interest. But let that go. You want to play poker, I believe?"

Roving Joe felt that his tongue was growing too thick for easy manipulation, and he only nodded. The rest of the party seated themselves, and quickly arranged the terms of the game between them. The ante was placed at a moderate figure, but there was to be no limit to the betting.

Roving Joe had read much and heard more about the cunning arts of gamblers when there was an object for them to gain, and he was just drunk enough now to be suspicious of foul play, without the power to detect it, unless unusually bare-faced. But like many another fool in a similar situation he fancied no one could draw the wool over his eyes, and he kept a close lookout for "cold decks" and "stocked cards," when once the game was fairly begun.

For the first few deals, the cards ran evenly, no heavy hands being out, and as Roving Joe won a couple of these trifling pots, his confidence in his skill grew still greater.

Wild Bill had spoken only the truth in saying that the young trapper was not fit to play with professionals, for his varying face was a perfect index of the hands he held, and when he called for two cards, on the draw, all knew that the three cards which he retained were good ones.

The cards were served, and Roving Joe, who held the "ace," with trembling hands, pushed up a large wager, this, together with his eager eyes and flushed countenance telling plainer than words that he had been lucky in the "draw."

Wild Bill and Harry Cornell drew out, but Tom Brady, cool as an ice-berg, "saw" Roving Joe's bet, then went a still heavier sum "better."

Roving Joe counted his pile, but lacked something over a hundred dollars of having enough to "call" the gambler. For a moment or two he hesitated, then resolved to take Harry into his confidence, and borrow the amount lacking of him.

At the first deal, he had received three aces, and had filled on the draw, thus having four aces, and an invincible hand, as he believed.

Harry saw this, and as there was no objection made to borrowing, handed Roving Joe the amount which he lacked.

"Call ye—what ye got?" said Roving Joe, vainly striving to conceal his exultation.

For answer Tom Brady spread out his hand: all hearts, constituting a "flush." Roving Joe laughed loudly, as he cried:

"Can't shine here, pard—reckon four aces stand over that show. Sorry to do it, but business is business, ye know."

"Easy, stranger," cried Brady, sharply, one hand covering the stakes while his other grasped a cocked and leveled revolver. "Don't be quite so fast, if you please."

"A straight flush, by the powers!" cried Harry, in consternation. "The only hand in the whole deck that could beat you, Joe. And he's got it!"

Amazed, Roving Joe stared at the cards. It was true, they constituted a straight, or "royal flush," which, when played, "laid over" four aces. But he knew, also, that this was not a regular hand, and played only when so understood before the game was begun. He said as much now, but Brady retorted:

"So we did agree. I'll leave it to either of these gentlemen—how was it, Bill?"

"That was the agreement, certainly. You must have heard it, young fellow. You've lost fairly. Don't kick about it."

At that moment Roving Joe made a startling discovery.

"Foul play!" he cried, whipping forth a revolver.

CHAPTER XI.

READING ROVING JOE A LESSON.

"FOUL play!" he repeated, thrusting the muzzle of his weapon full into the face of Tom Brady, who seemed utterly taken by surprise by the swift movement. "Hands off, or I'll blow you through!"

The discovery was one which a sober man would have made the instant the cards were faced, for the royal flush consisted of ace to five-spot, both inclusive, and as Roving Joe held four aces, there were five aces out, two of them of hearts.

With a swift sweep of his left hand, Roving Joe turned the cards of his opponent over, showing that the ace of hearts therein was of a different pattern on the reverse.

At the same instant, his pistol was grasped by Harry Cornell, so suddenly that it was wrested from his hand without being discharged. Wild Bill also grasped Brady, who was almost foaming at the mouth, so intense seemed to be his indignation at the accusation of cheating.

"Let up, Bill!" he raged. "Let up, I say! He's got to eat those words, or I'll have his heart's blood!"

Roving Joe was almost entirely sobered by these events, and was beginning to get "red-hot" at what he deemed was a preconcerted plan to rob him of his hard-earned money.

"Let the dirty black-leg, loose," he said, sharply. "Turn him loose, and look out for yourselves—or I'll fight you all in a lump, for durned if I don't believe you're all in the scheme to rob me, just because you thought me too drunk to find you out!"

Instantly Tom Brady became the cool, steady-nerved man he had seemed before the exposure. His voice was steady as he spoke, with an icy smile:

"No man ever called me a black-leg, and lived a day to boast of his audacity. If you

are not a coward, sir, you will give me the satisfaction of a gentleman."

"Say a thief, and you'll come closer to the mark," retorted Roving Joe, now more like his usual self, "but I won't stand on trifles. I'll fight you when, how and where you please."

The sharp speech seemed to anger Brady, even more than the accusation of cheating, for he wrested himself loose from the grasp of Wild Bill, and leaped toward Roving Joe. Fortunately they had both been disarmed, else there might have been a tragedy performed; as it was, there was blood shed, for the young trapper met the rush of the gambler with a heavy blow straight out from the shoulder, knocking him headlong to the floor, almost across the room.

Again the two excited men were pounced upon, and held harmless until they had time to cool off a little. During this time, Wild Bill was speaking in low, earnest tones to the gambler, but if he was trying to patch up a peace, his endeavors were wasted. Both Roving Joe and Brady were too eager for a meeting to yield to arguments.

"There's no use in talking," sullenly said the gambler. "I played the game in good faith. I did not deal the cards, nor did I notice that one of them was different from the rest of the pack. I won the money fairly, but I am ready to yield my claim to it, if that fellow will meet me as a gentleman should—and at once."

"I'll do that quick enough, never you fear," retorted the young trapper, just enough of the whisky remaining in him to render him ready for a fight with friend or foe. "If they refuse, I'll brand them the same as I branded you—dirty cheats and tricksters!"

"You're digging your grave with your tongue, young fellow," said Wild Bill, sternly. "Keep a bridle on it, if you are wise. You have said too much already."

"Try me, and you'll find I can act as well as talk," was the swift retort. "I'm nothing but a boy, I know, but I've held my own among men before to-day, and I reckon I can do it again. After I've settled with him, I'll tackle you, if you think I've trod on your toes."

Wild Bill looked at the angry lad for a moment, then turned away to conceal a smile. Evidently he was not mortally offended by this blunt defiance.

"You won't let it drop, Brady?" he asked, turning to the gambler, who was stanching the blood which dripped freely from his nose, where Joe's hard fist had alighted.

"Not unless he gets down on his knees and apologizes," was the short response.

"Of course that is out of the question," turning once more to Roving Joe.

"I'll see him ducked first, and then I won't!" was the blunt response. "Give us our tools, and let's have it out."

"No. You may fight, since you both are determined on doing so, but it must be after a civilized fashion. The moon is bright enough for fair shooting, and the night pleasant enough for a walk. We'll take a little stroll out of town, where you can amuse yourselves, without being interrupted by a staring crowd. How does that suit you both?"

"I'm not hard to please," said Roving Joe, coolly enough.

"Anywhere or any way, just so I get a fair chance at the rascal," growled Tom Brady.

"Not to-night—wait until morning," urged Harry Cornell, earnestly. "That will give them both time to cool off."

"One or the other of us will be cool enough, long before day-dawn," grimly interposed Brady, and as he heard these words, Roving Joe felt a little shiver creeping over him, and he began to think of the dear ones at home.

He thought of his dear mother, and how grieved she would be, should anything serious happen to him, and she learned that it had been brought about by his breaking his promise to her, never to drink strong liquor, no matter what the temptation. And then and there Roving Joe took an oath, none the less solemn for being silent, that, come what might, that, his first drunk, should be his last. And right here it may be added that he has sacredly kept his vow. In all his wanderings after that day, Roving Joe has never tasted a drop of liquor.

The duel by moonlight having been fairly decided upon, neither Wild Bill nor Harry Cornell raised any further objections, but perfected the few necessary arrangements with a gusto and air of evident enjoyment the principals were far from sharing, judging from their serious demeanor.

In couples they left the house, Harry taking Roving Joe by the arm and talking to him in low, eager whispers. His conversation was but poorly calculated to encourage one who was on the point of risking his life on the "field of honor," since it treated almost wholly of the numerous duels and street-fights in which Tom Brady had been engaged, and out of all of which he had come with flying colors, leaving his men on the field, either dead or disabled.

"I know you've got the sand, when it comes to the pinch, but it's a sorter snap-game, whichever card you turn up for trumps," he added, gloomily. "S'pose you do turn Brady's toes up by a lucky shot: his gang runs the town, and as soon as they hear of it, they'll go for you. Your only show will be to pull out for a healthier country the minute the row is over."

This was highly comforting, to say the least, and Roving Joe was beginning to wish that he had taken that oath of total abstinence before, rather than after the disturbance, when Wild Bill called a halt, having reached a spot sufficiently removed from town, and where the "fun" could come off at their ease.

Calling Cornell aside, they talked earnestly for a few minutes, then returning, Wild Bill said:

"You understand the conditions of the duel, I believe, as already decided upon, but on consultation we have concluded to make one change. Tom uses self-cockers, while Joe has the single-action Colt, of a smaller caliber. To make it an even matter to both, you can use my tools," and he produced the brace of ivory-handled revolvers, which became so celebrated in after days in his hands.

Neither of the duelists raised any objections, and Roving Joe mechanically took the weapon offered him, as Wild Bill continued:

"We'll mark off twenty paces, at which distance the fun will begin. When you are both ready, I'll say fire, then count three. You'll be

at liberty to fire at any time after the word fire and before the word three. The man who pulls before the first, or waits to fire his first shot after the last, I'll shoot down like a dog. After that, you can advance and burn powder at will."

Meanwhile Joe was testing the revolver handed him, trying the hammers and triggers. He found them much lighter on the trigger than he was accustomed to, and knowing that this would place him at a serious disadvantage, his old suspicions returned, and he quietly exchanged the weapon for his own.

"All ready, gents?" cried Wild Bill, as the duelists faced each other. "Good enough. Bear in mind the warning I gave you. Fire! One—two—three!"

Almost simultaneously the two weapons exploded.

CHAPTER XII.

HOW THE LESSON ENDED.

ROVING JOE had determined his course of action beforehand, which was to deliver one shot as quickly as he could put it in, then rush forward to close quarters. He felt that his nerves had been unsteadied by the poisonous stuff he had swallowed, and that he would stand but little show with the steel-nerved card-sharp, at a game of long bowls.

The first part of his plan was carried out, and he made one leap forward, when Tom Brady uttered a wild yell, and staggering back, with one hand tearing at his right breast, fell heavily to the ground, groaning:

"Curse you, Wild Bill—I've got my last dose!"

Wild Bill darted to his side, while Harry Cornell hastened to where Roving Joe was standing, his weapon half-leveled.

"You've settled him, pard, as I knew you would," he uttered hurriedly. "But we've got to skin out of this in a hurry, unless we want to lose our scalps. His crowd won't rest easy until they have avenged his fall—"

"Hold on, there!" shouted Wild Bill, as Harry began hurrying the young trapper away from the spot. "The devil's to pay, sure enough! Tom's shot through and through!"

"You can bear witness that it was a fair fight on our side, Bill—" began the cowboy, only to be cut short.

"Drop that nonsense!" growled the border-man, leaving the fallen gambler, and striding over to where the two mates stood. "Let me see the weapon you used, young fellow—by the Lord! I thought as much!" he exclaimed, as he took the pistol from the hand of the young duelist. "Serves us right for being such infernal fools! But it's mighty rough on poor Tom."

"He isn't hurt," swiftly asked Cornell.

"Only enough to fit him for a wooden overcoat," was the grim response. "How did you come to use this tool, young fellow?" he demanded, eying Roving Joe almost savagely.

Until now, the young trapper had been too much stunned by the fall of his antagonist and the strange words of the two seconds to fully realize his situation, but these stern words were sufficient to arouse him.

"You gave me a weapon that worked like a

hair-trigger rifle, when you knew that I had been drinking too much to handle the tool properly. My own pistol was smaller bore, so you can't say there was anything foul about it."

"Except our deuced folly in making up such a game," was the response, emphasized by a strong curse. "Explain it all to him, Cornell, while I see what can be done for poor Brady."

It was a thankless task thus set for the cowboy, but he managed to perform it after a fashion.

When too late, he realized his mistake in persuading Roving Joe to drink, and then tried his best to remedy the error, before worse should come of it. As the reader has already been informed, his first installment of pay came in the shape of a knock-down blow, that spread his nose half over his face. Knowing that he had only himself to blame, and liking the young fellow too well to retaliate in kind, he retreated from the gambling room, until he could recover the mastery of himself.

When he returned, it was to find Roving Joe in the toils of two notorious blacklegs, and too drunk to see that they were preparing to fleece him of all he had. Knowing the men by reputation to be desperate characters, and in ignorance of how many friends and backers they might have in the room, he sought the aid of Wild Bill, who had taken quite a fancy to the young cowboy.

Only for the liquor, to which he was totally unused, rendering Roving Joe stubborn as a mule and almost as balky, all would have gone well; but he had taken the notion that his duty to poor old Sabe Sollars demanded that he carry out the oft-repeated desire of his to have "one more be-old jamboree" before pegging out, and this he was bound to do as far as lay in his power.

Then it was that the two men "put up a job" on Roving Joe, by means of which they hoped to read him a lesson which would not soon be forgotten. At any rate, he would be kept out of danger for that night, and if possible led into fleeing the town with Harry, who was ready to start for the cattle-ranges.

Tom Brady was called in to aid them in carrying out the plot, and most admirably played the part assigned him, though that knock-down blow was not in the programme as he understood it. The pistols of Wild Bill had been prepared beforehand, loaded with blank charges, and it was settled that Tom Brady was to fall at the first shot, when Roving Joe was to be made to believe that his only chance for safety lay in rapid flight from the vicinity before the "crowd" of the gambler should get wind of his death.

All would have gone well, only for the carelessness of the seconds, who, being behind the scenes, and thinking there could be no danger, forgot to remove Roving Joe's own tools.

Only for the luckless gambler who lay in a pool of his own blood, nearly unconscious, though feebly groaning at each breath he drew, Roving Joe might have felt angry at the stupendous practical joke of which he was to be the victim, but now he could feel only deep regret for the unfortunate man.

The bullet had passed through his right breast, tearing through his lungs, and lodging, as examination showed, just beneath the skin of his back. Though not necessarily fatal, it was a very severe wound, and the only hope lay in the iron constitution of the gambler, together with careful nursing.

"The first thing is to get him back to town, without letting any outsiders know what has happened," said Wild Bill, naturally taking the lead in the affair. "They would all mean well enough, but Tom is such a favorite with all that their crowding around would do him no good. Cut a couple of sticks, if you can find them, to make a sort of litter."

By a free use of their outside garments, a comfortable litter was formed, and on it the wounded gambler was carried back to town, where Wild Bill soon had a good surgeon to work on the injury.

It was nearly morning before the decision for which Roving Joe so anxiously waited was delivered. It was not positively favorable, but to the import that with good care Tom Brady might recover his health in the course of time.

While his wounded friend was under the care of the surgeon, Wild Bill had a brief talk with Roving Joe.

"We were more to blame than you, that I'm free to own, though it was all undertaken to do you a service. We meant to win your money, and either scare you out of the place, where sooner or later you must have fallen into the hands of the card-sharps, or else, if you stood fire, make you believe you had killed poor Tom and that you would be lynched by his friends unless you pulled out in a hurry. That was our plan, but you knocked it higher than a kite by using your own pistol instead of the doctored one, as agree upon."

"I don't say you were so much to blame, but all the same, you shot Tom, and if he dies, it will be you that killed him. He is my mate. If he dies, and you run across my trail too often, I'd rub you out, and couldn't help it."

"If you're a wise man you'll pull out of this with your mate. It's the last time I'll give you warning."

This seemed a little rough to Roving Joe, who had entered into the duel with perfect good faith, honestly believing he was risking his life, but the unfortunate accident had tamed his spirit not a little, while—if the truth must be told—the poison he had swallowed the night before was now working its full revenge. He was feeling too utterly miserable to resent the stern language which Wild Bill used toward him, and when Harry Cornell repeated much the same arguments, the young trapper yielded, and the two friends left Cheyenne with the first gleams of the rising sun, and before another person in town knew how that intended lesson had ended.

Harry Cornell was bound for the "long-horn" region on the borders of Kansas and Colorado, and had little difficulty in inducing Roving Joe to join him and try for a while the wild life of a cowboy.

There was no difficulty in securing an opening for one who came recommended by "Rattling Harry," and so Roving Joe tried yet another method of making his fortune.

They had been thus engaged for several months, when the glad tidings came that Tom Brady had almost entirely recovered from his wound, and Roving Joe was thus relieved of the apprehension which—now that he knew better the manner of man Wild Bill really was—he had secretly felt of being called to account by the famous fighter for the death of his mate.

Notwithstanding the many temptations which assailed him, Roving Joe sacredly kept his resolution never to taste liquor, though he was forced to fight more than once to get out of it. But he had a staunch aid in Rattling Harry, who never forgot the lesson of that night in Cheyenne, and who always backed his mate up in his resolution.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BEAUTIES OF A COWBOY LIFE.

ROVING JOE soon grew tired of his new experiment. He was not long in finding out that there was little of romance or aught else attractive in the life of a cowboy, for one with even the slightest trace of "mother's milk" left in his composition. The most of it was hard and killing work, varied only by an occasional drunk or fight. Joe was never overly fond of the last, though he could manage to hold up his end when there was no fair way of getting out of it, and he was firmly resolved not to drink, under any circumstances.

Though his situation was not a bed of roses, as the cowboys considered he was trying to put on "too many frills," Roving Joe stuck it out until the "fall drive" took place, then he, in company with Rattling Harry and a dozen others, started with a big drove of cattle for Abilene, Kansas, at that time the main shipping point for the "long-horns" of that section.

There were 8,000 head in the drove, and for the first week out, we were accompanied by nearly a score of extra hands, for it is no easy matter to start such a big drove away from the range to which they have grown accustomed, though the "long-horns" soon get to know what is expected of them, and after that give very little extra trouble; with one proviso, always—unless they take a notion to "stampede."

Luckily these wild stampedes do not occur very frequently, but when they do, they are terrible. No mortal pen can do the subject justice. Unless one "has been there," the reality cannot even be imagined.

What the cause, no man can say with positiveness. Sometimes the blame is laid upon a prowling wolf or sneaking red-skin, but this explanation would not serve for either of the two stampedes which Roving Joe witnessed. On both occasions, the run was made at night, when there was a storm brewing, the air being full of electricity. Each time the entire herd started to its feet at the same instant and thundered away through the darkness like mad. There was no time for the affright to spread from any one point. Panic seized on each and every one of the thousands of long-horns at the same moment, without the slightest warning.

On the night in question, Roving Joe and four others of the cowboys were taking their

"turn on," which consisted of riding slowly around the sleeping-ground of the herd, a precaution which is never neglected while "on the road."

It was probably about one o'clock, Roving Joe and his squad being called on guard at midnight, when they were sleepily circling the sleeping herd, when, without the slightest warning, without the least suspicious motion until the decisive one, the entire drove were upon their feet, breaking away in the wildest of stampedes, heading in the precise direction where Roving Joe and one of the other cowboys then happened to be.

The fierce, resistless sweep of a cyclone is all that Roving Joe can liken that frenzied charge to. The clattering of horns and the thundering of cloven hoofs was deafening. And each one of the long-horns set up a wild bellowing that might have been heard for miles; but this lasted only for a few moments, then they ran voiceless.

Until that stampede came, Roving Joe was rather more than half asleep, but as he whirled his horse to flee for life he was wide enough awake. He plied spurs and whip, for to be overtaken meant certain death beneath those countless hoofs.

Luckily there was a little light shed by the few stars which peeped through the cracks between the clouds, and still more fortunate was it that the horse Roving Joe bestrode was well-trained to the business, and knew just what was expected of him. But for that, it is almost certain that the young cowboy would have been crushed to death before he was fairly awake.

Straining every nerve, the gallant horse kept clear of the stampede, at the same time sheering to the left, to get to the outside line, where the rest would be easier.

Long ere this was accomplished, Roving Joe had mastered the situation, and was once more himself. The noise was so frightful that he could not hear his own voice, even when he yelled the loudest, and so he had no means of learning whether or no there were any others helping him; but the cowboy soon learns to depend altogether on himself, and Roving Joe set to work with a will.

There is only one chance of checking a genuine stampede before the long-horns have fairly run themselves to a standstill, and this plan is always tried by experienced cowboys the instant they can secure a position on the flank and near the head cattle. It is technically known as "milling," and it was this that Roving Joe tried as soon as his own life was comparatively out of danger.

Racing close alongside the maddened cattle, yelling and plying his whip with all the vigor he could summon, he endeavored to force the leaders from the straight line they were following, pushing them hard on the flanks, turning their heads little by little to the right. He knew that if he could do this with a few of the head ones, all would be right in the end, for the rest of the herd, like sheep, will blindly follow after their leaders.

Inch by inch, foot by foot, Roving Joe gained his object, not trying to effect the change too

rapidly, for then some of the rest would be sure to fly off at a tangent, when the situation would be worse than ever.

It was fully an hour before the point was fairly won, not altogether by Roving Joe, for as the long-horns began to moderate their speed, he could hear his mates similarly engaged. At the end of that period, the herd was thoroughly "milled." The leaders had been forced round and round, the others following them, until a huge, solid circle of panting beasts was formed, still rushing round, but not advancing any in a direct line.

Still the danger was by no means over with. At any instant some of the long-horns might break off from the rest at a tangent, which would certainly result in another and even more desperate "run."

To guard against this, the cowboys rode at full speed around the still "milling" cattle, yelling and swinging their whips, hoping to hold them thus until they had time to recover from their panic.

It was wild and weary work, yet with a strong element of the ludicrous in it. There is nothing which will bring a thoroughly frightened or crazy steer to its senses more surely or quickly than the sound of the human voice. Knowing this, one of the cowboys struck up a song, as he rode for dear life around the snorting, bellowing, trampling "mill." The rest of the boys chimed in, but after the first song, each one chose his own favorite, forming a medley fearful to contemplate in cold blood, but more soothing to the nerves of the maddened long-horns, than would have been the finest of operatic music.

Many a time and oft has Roving Joe laughed until his ribs ached as he recalls that midnight serenade. Here was one galloping fellow bellowing forth "Lorena," another howling "Home, Sweet Home," while from over yonder came the doleful accents of "Mary had a Little Lamb," and in still another voice: "My name it is Joe Bowers, I'm all the way from Pike," crooned out by a cowboy who, if not actually asleep in the saddle while "riding the circuit," was next door to it.

It is little short of the marvelous, under what circumstances the cowboy will sleep, especially when "on the road." Then he has no regular hours for sleep, or rather, he is liable to be called into the saddle at any moment, and thus learns to sleep any where and how, even while performing his duty.

On this night, after the long-horns were quieted down, Roving Joe fell asleep while slowly riding around the herd, little dreaming of the terrible awaking which was to be his.

The first intimation he had of danger, was when the hard coils of a lasso struck him in the face as he rode bent over the pommel of his saddle, but before he could utter a cry, or lift a hand in self-defense, he was plucked from the saddle, striking the ground with a force that knocked the breath out of his body, and nearly deprived him of his senses. Like one in some frightful nightmare, he was just conscious that he was seized by strong hands, a gag forced into his mouth, and a cloth wound about his

head, as if to prevent him from recognizing his assailants. Still as one in a dream, Roving Joe knew that he was being bound upon the back of some animal, whether horse or steer, he could not tell. He can remember how tightly the cords were drawn that held him in place, and how the creature to whom he was tied, struggled to free itself; but not a word or sound could he catch to tell him who were the authors of the cowardly outrage.

When securely bound upon the animal's back, Roving Joe knew that it was being led slowly away, every effort being tried to make it go quietly, as though the rascals were afraid of alarming the rest of the cow boys. Then—the creature was cast loose, and urged to break-neck speed with fiercely cutting whips, more than one blow from which fell upon Joe. A wild routing bellow told Roving Joe that he was riding a long-horn, and then his senses mercifully fled.

How long that terrible ride lasted, or what were the exact circumstances under which it finally came to an end, Roving Joe never fully comprehended. The first face which he recognized on returning to consciousness, was that of Rattling Harry, but his rescue was not due to him as the cowboy at first believed. When missed in the morning, Cornell flatly refused to proceed with the cattle until Joe was found, and so was left behind by the rest. There was little clew to work by, but that same evening, Harry found his mate in the care of a couple of buffalo-

hunters, who had shot the steer on which the poor devil was bound.

Roving Joe received some painful bruises when the long-horn fell dead, but the thought of what a frightful fate must have been his, only for that providential meeting with the two buffalo-hunters, kept him from bewailing these.

It was never learned for certain who were the authors of this fiendish outrage, though the cowboys with whom Roving Joe had fought and bested because of his refusal to drink with them, were strongly suspected by the two mates. Still, there was no positive proof, and to this day Roving Joe is still their debtor.

Joe and Harry overtook the herd, and continued with it until Abilene was reached, when they asked for their pay, and took the cars for St Joseph, where they arrived on time.

That was the only experience Roving Joe cared for in the cowboy line. He was in love with adventure, but he could never, after that stormy night, see where the "fun came in," or of what the "romance of cowboy life" consisted.

Though his career as a "Fortune-Hunter" had not proven a success, Roving Joe was satisfied to settle down at home for a while, though the old "prairie fever" was by no means entirely burnt out. But I have told what I set out to do, and the time has come for me to say once more, "Good-by."

THE END.

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